CO-CREATING BRAND MEANING IN THE POSTMODERN ERA: UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER AWARENESS OF BRANDING IN THE ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

K A HARDCASTLE

PhD

2020

CO-CREATING BRAND MEANING IN THE POSTMODERN ERA: UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER AWARENESS OF BRANDING IN THE ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

KIMBERLEY AIMEE HARDCASTLE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences

March 2020

ABSTRACT

Branding as a co-creative postmodern process has become increasingly significant for higher education (HE) institutes due to the marketisation of the HE sector. However, research exploring student consumer's perceptions and actions in relation to the co-creative and experiential nature of postmodern brand meanings, consumer culture and identity is limited. In particular, insight into student-centred experiences with a university brand over time and across the consumption and enculturation journey is absent.

This thesis employs an interpretive consumer culture lens to explore the longitudinal consumer experiences with a HE brand in the postmodern environment. Using a three-stage approach, this thesis maps the student consumer's undergraduate HE journey to explain the co-creation of brand meaning. The key stages are (1) pre-arrival, (2) arrival on campus and (3) the end of the student consumers first full year. Data collection at the pre-arrival stage (the first study) adopted a Netnographic approach; arrival on campus (the second study) used focus groups to understand the initial consumption stage; and the end of first year (the third study) employed semi-structured interviews to explore individual interpretative strategies and lived experiences. The evolution of the three stages allowed for different perceptions of the brand co-creation process to emerge across the longitudinal journey.

Adopting a longitudinal study design, which enabled student consumers to describe their mediated and lived experiences with the university brand, revealed how the socialisation and enculturation processes informed their co-creative strategies. The contributions to knowledge developed through interpretation of these findings include, an understanding of brand meaning and awareness in the HE environment emerging as a more complex and fragmented processes than previous studies had acknowledged. In particular, although there is some level of brand experience that existed prior to the student consumers arriving and enrolling, actual brand meaning is co-created iteratively within ongoing social interactions between student consumer, their peers, the university brand and the marketplace. The thesis recommendations provide practical theory-based suggestions vital to university brands understanding of how postmodern brand meaning and experience is co-created. Such as, by adopting a cultural approach, HE marketers can place greater emphasis on relationship management strategies unique to each stage of the journey and therefore benefit from the student consumer's co-creative insights evolving at each stage.

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This PhD thesis is dedicated to my beautiful grandparents Jean, Kenneth and Marjorie, without your love, guidance and generosity, particularly in my early years, this doctorate would not have been possible.

I miss you dearly.

I hope I have made you proud.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been completed without the help, support and encouragement of a number of people throughout the process of my PhD. A huge debt is owed to Dr Paul Cook, whose non-judgemental and unwavering positivity entered my PhD journey at a time where I truly required Paul's involvement. Paul's outlook on knowledge and interpretation coupled with his incredible support allowed me to build my confidence to levels I could have only imagined before starting this journey. Thank you, Paul for giving me the freedom to develop my own research interests and allowing numerous meetings to overrun to encourage philosophical debate, meetings that never once made me feel like you were in a rush to be elsewhere. A truly underrated quality in academics in the current climate. Dr Matthew Sutherland, thank you for continuously providing an opposing critical voice throughout the thesis, constantly encouraging me to engage with complexity and package my arguments accordingly, resulting in a better understanding of my work. Most importantly, thank you for introducing me to Northumbria Business School and helping me cement my academic identity as a Marketer. Dr Prabash Edirisingha, although a late arrival to the team your contribution has been invaluable, providing new ideas and interesting directions for the thesis, a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. Without the intellectual discernment of these individuals and their generous allocation of time spent reading drafts and helping me to clarify ideas, this work would not have been possible.

To my family and friends who have been very patient with my lack of engagement in social activities over the PhD journey, thank you for persevering, I hope to be present very soon. Particularly, Tom, who has experienced the many highs and lows of the PhD with me, and has stood by me providing unwavering encouragement and support throughout. I thank you not just for being there throughout the process, particularly over the last few endless months, but most importantly for believing in me.

To Professor Robert Kozinets who was kind enough to give me a generous amount of time and feedback which shaped my writing and ideas on Netnography. Professor Kozinets extensive comments, constructive critiques and recommendations strengthened and assisted publication of this PhD's first study. The contribution of

these communication efforts has also enriched the contents of this thesis more generally.

A huge amount of thanks to countless other academics from the Department of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation and staff from the Marketing, Operations and Systems department in Northumbria Business School, for the friendships, opportunity, resources and advice required to complete this thesis. I would also like to extend my thanks to academics who are part of the Academy of Marketing community and the European Association of Sport Management community that have offered support and shaped my ideas when presenting at conferences.

Liverpool FC, what can I say? I have waited my whole life to watch you win the Premier League and you finally achieve this during one of the most important years of my life. Watching you play while I have been writing my thesis has been an absolute pleasure, at times, I was very grateful for the distraction.

Finally, I would like to offer my thanks to the students that took part in this study. Their voluntary participation in this study was very much appreciated.

*Special thanks to Covid-19 in its attempts to derail the five years' worth of work that went into the thesis at the final hurdle.

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee and University Ethics Committee.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 74, 954 words

Name: Kimberley Aimee Hardcastle

Signature:

Date: 31/03/2020

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter One Introduction

This thesis explores the process of students' brand meaning making in English Higher Education (HE), by proposing that student consumers in HE co-create brand meaning on a longitudinal journey and brand meaning changes and evolves throughout this process. This chapter provides an introduction to the PhD thesis. First, the background to marketing in the English HE sector is discussed, acknowledging the contemporary challenges within the sector, such as the growing need to become financially sustainable and consumer centric. This is followed by a rationale for adopting the theoretical concept of co-creation to explore brand meaning, namely, how the concept of co-creation can be used as a framework for understanding how student consumers co-create brand meaning in HE. From here, an overview of the methodology is provided before outlining the overall researchable question and research objectives. The significance of the research is recognised before concluding with an outline of the forthcoming chapters that form the thesis.

1.1 Background and Contextualisation of Study

Since the 1990s, research has been commissioned to explore the expansion of the English HE sector and the role of universities in society. In fact, the Barlow Report (1960) considered how to increase the number of university applicants targeting ex-serviceman (this was based on figures published in the Great Britain Ministry of Education Report, 1946), identifying a need to upskill the nation's workforce

following the end of World War II. Similarly, the Jarratt Report (1985) completed an audit of the English HE sector and recommended how senior university executives could develop efficiencies and financial cost savings to promote the expansion of the sector. Much of this was attributed to putting strategies in place to increase the nation's competitiveness (Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon (Eds.), 2010). The expansion of the sector was further supported in 1997 with the publishing of the Dearing Report. This report recommended that for the first time current undergraduate students should contribute towards the cost of their tuition through the introduction of tuition fees, a recommendation that created the impetus for a significant ideological shift towards the marketisation of the HE sector.

Marketisation of HE can be described as the process that enables government owned enterprises (such as universities) to adopt increasingly market-based principles, such as charging a premium price for prestigious HE brands. As such, the concept of marketisation draws upon techniques that are more commonly used within private sector businesses (Furedi, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Jonathan, 1997; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In fact, much of the research on the marketisation of HE was promoted by declining public funding and rising student numbers (Greenaway & Haynes, 2003), where many saw education as a 'product' and knowledge 'capital', through the process of commodification, and for students and industry to be re-designated as 'customers' (DfES, 2003, p. 47) or 'consumers' and Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) as 'providers' (Bridges & McLaughlin, 1994; Coffield, 2000; Lawrence & Sharma, 2002; Moran, 1998; Saunders, & Blanco Ramírez, 2017). In 2012 when the new fee regime commenced, which meant English universities could charge up to £9000 annually (in line with inflation and increasing due to the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework more recently

2017/2018), English universities recognised the importance of attracting and enrolling prospective students onto their undergraduate programmes in order to protect revenue (Bolsmann, & Miller, 2008). It is important to acknowledge the context of this thesis and the implications fee increases have had on English universities. That is, the research draws from an English university, English universities have a different tuition fee system to other UK (and global) universities. It is this system which has resulted in a marketised English HE sector with universities acting as private businesses rather than institutions under the control of the government.

Following a period of government reforms, the process of marketising higher education was consolidated by the Browne Report in 2010 and accelerated in subsequent government policy and legislation resulting in a paradigm shift in terms of funding, restructuring and remodelling of the HE sector (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Consequently, marketisation involves English universities having significant control of operational, legal and financial autonomy; liberalisation of market entry (deregulation); competition between universities with students having choice of where, what and how to study; and user charges to cover all or a substantial percentage of tuition costs (Brown, 2011; Molesworth et al., 2010; Ochwa-Echel 2013). These marketisation conditions are a result of a political neoliberal economic agenda, which seeks to privatise, or offload, public services to the individual so that they have to be bought at market value rather than have them provided by the state (Lynch, 2006). Neoliberalism is perceived by some as a new phase in the evolution of capitalism (Dumenil & Levy, 2013), but it is also often referred to as the 'market society' (Mautner, 2010) or 'consumer society' (Esposito, & Pérez, 2010). The rationale for marketisation under this agenda for universities rests on the belief that competition is a defining characteristic and therefore the "*best use of resources is obtained where*

universities interact directly with students as customers, rather than with the government or a government agency acting on students' behalf" (Brown, 2015, p. 5). Therefore, if universities improve systems, reduce average costs, they can operate within a more market based environment and can experience improved performance (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Endorsing the Browne Report (2010) then Minister for Higher Education, Willetts, was convinced that a private contribution was necessary if quality was to be maintained, and that *"unleashing the forces of consumerism"* was the best way of restoring high academic standards (Willetts, 2013, cited in Davis, A. (Ed.), (2017, p. 105). This corresponds to a capitalist ideology in which consumerism has emerged as a dominant feature of contemporary society. As such, tuition fees were introduced and most of the funding universities now receive comes from student-paid tuition fees rather than government grants, which positions universities in direct competition with each other (GOV.UK, 2020). Over time tuition fees gradually increased, the increase in tuition fee was designed to create a more varied pricing model with higher ranked universities (such as those in the Russell group) charging £9K annually and post-1992 universities charging prices around £4K annually, this did not happen and these changes resulted in the average tuition price in England being £8,389 (UCAS, 2012). The governments' price differentiation strategy was unsuccessful, because in practice, no university wants to position their brand to make it seem that their course is worth less than a competing institution, thus, many universities charged the maximum tuition. Therefore, with price not being a vehicle for competition, universities at all levels were required to think about how they attract and retain prospective students, this included other forms of differentiation such as branding. As a result, there ensued an English higher education market where

universities compete for students on factors other than price, and therefore those institutions with a strong brand are more likely to prosper in the market.

1.1.2 Emergence and Development of Branding in HE

Traditionally, branding has been linked to the commercial sector with the objective of discerning products or services whose *"dimensions differentiate it in some way from other products or services designed to satisfy the same need"* (Kotler & Keller, 2009, p 426). Although well established in the private sector, Waeraas and Solbakk (2009) argue that despite visible examples of branding efforts through vision statements, image design, and organisational values, there is a dearth of research and a need to better understand the challenges involved in branding universities. This is because the extant literature in HE branding has largely focused on branding policies in general (Belanger, Mount, & Wilson, 2002; Chapleo 2004; Judson, Gorchels, & Aurand, 2006), brand architecture and performance (Chapleo & Simms 2010; Leijerholt, Chapleo, & O'Sullivan 2019), corporate branding (Balmer, Liao, & Wang, 2010), brand image (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardanna, 2007) or fixated on extrovert aspects of branding (Bulotaite 2003; Gray, Fam & Llanes, 2003). Notwithstanding the proliferation in its use, researchers raise questions over the extent to which universities understand branding, as Melewar, Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Fetscherin, & Usunier, (2012, p. 744) argue, features of corporate branding, such as corporate identity, corporate reputation and corporate image remain *"largely undefined and there is clearly no consensus as to what they mean".* In referring to higher education, Hall (2003) observes that the error marketers make in undeveloped markets is worrying about their logos rather than viewing the brand as a central organising idea around which to build a strategic offer. Likewise, Chapleo (2007, pp. 28-29) found branding was understood by some Chief Executives in UK universities as relating to *"the visual elements that*

constitute a brand", he also notes that to summarise a clear principle or simple set of values is difficult to achieve in universities given their diversity and complexity (Chapleo, 2007). This demonstrates some of the challenges universities encounter in attempting to build a strong brand. Additionally, organisations are seldom able to create a *"meaningful connection"* with their stakeholders (Balmer, Mukherjee, Greyser, Jenster, & Kay, 2006, p. 744) and more specifically Balmer and Gray (2003) argue that a fundamental issue in itself is for a university to try and communicate a diverse and complex brand to multiple stakeholders (Chapleo, 2011). It is clear that the application of branding principles borrowed from the business sector poses some significant challenges in the higher education context. These include; communicating a naturally diverse and complex university's corporate brand to multiple stakeholders with disparate perceptions (Roper & Davies, 2007); tensions emerging relating to whether reputation and brand are the same thing (Chapleo, 2011); internal resistance to the very concept, or a rather simplistic implementation of branding by university marketing practitioners (Chapleo, 2007). To add to this, much of the research has focussed on the supply sides' ability to build a strong brand in the HE environment, with limited attention paid to understanding the co-creative involvement of the demand side. As such, the focus has been university centred and less concerned with the active role the students play in co-creating the brand process (Foroudi, Yu, Gupta, & Foroudi, 2019).

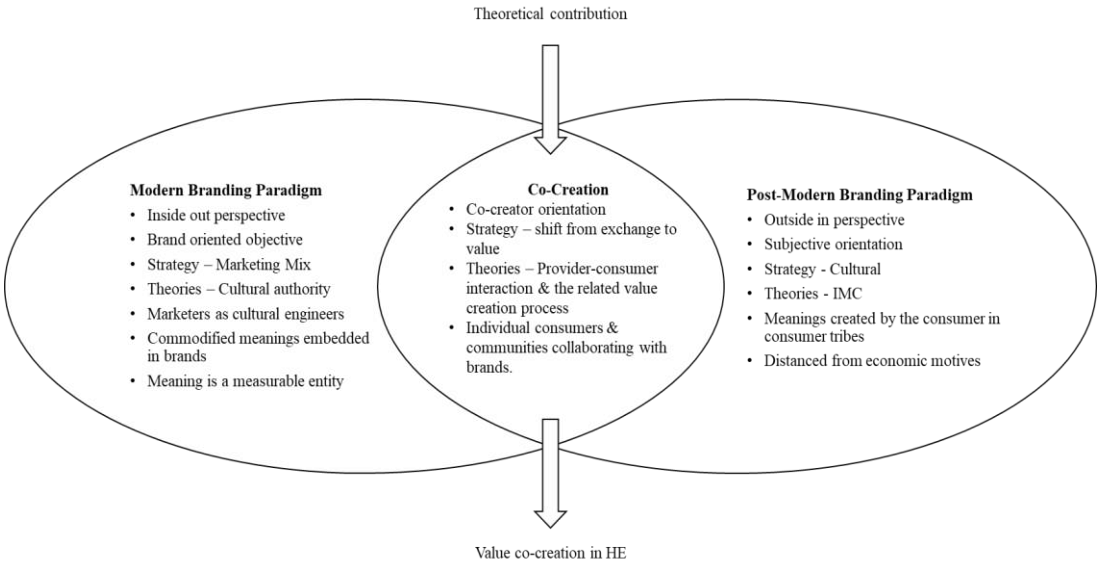
These challenges add to the growing body of work that questions the suitability of the simple transfer of commercial branding approaches to higher education (Jevons, 2006; Temple, 2006; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). Additionally, while Temple (2006, p. 16) states that HE in particular is reliant on *"the abilities, motivations, and interactions of the students themselves"* there appears to have been very little research in establishing

the views of students on branding (Jevons, 2006). More recently, researchers (Nguyen, Melewar & Hemsley-Brown, 2019; Winter & Chapleo, 2017) suggest that in contemporary years university branding has increased substantially, with publications focused on university branding activities (Chapleo, 2017; Lowrie, 2017), more specifically, theoretical and methodological aspects of brand strategy, planning and measurement in HE (Nguyen et al., 2019). However, these studies (see Nguyen et al., 2019; Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, Nguyen, & Wilson, 2016) focus largely on conceptual explorations of the brand building activities of English universities (from the inside-out), with limited direct attention on what the brand means (from the outside-in) (Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, Nguyen, & Wilson, 2016). An understanding of how student consumers create, share and co-create brand meaning is of particular importance for building a strong brand in HE, since these meanings motivate the choices consumers make and the attitudes they form towards brands (Batey, 2008). Therefore, a detailed understanding of what the university brand means warrants a student-centred exploration of the English HE sector. Critically, understanding student-centred experiences with the brand over time across a journey is central to the thesis exploration. Accordingly, this thesis explores brand meaning in the English HE market, with a specific focus on contemporary consumer society traits that influence student consumer awareness of branding in the HE sector.

1.2 Rationale for Theoretical Approach of the Study

The theoretical focus of this study is situated at the intersection of modern branding theory with its interdisciplinary roots of co-creation theory (Holt, 2002; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2004a & b; Vargo & Lusch, 2004a & b) and postmodern branding theory. The academic positioning of this study is illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Theoretical framework and contribution of study (adapted from Gronroos, 2011; Grönroos & Voima, 2013).



1.2.1 Evolving Marketing and Branding Paradigms, Co-Creation and the HE Environment

The paradigm shift from modern marketing strategies to the adoption of more consumer-centric relationship marketing is well established in the marketing literature (Berry, 1995). Central to the modernist approach is the marketing mix. According to Grönroos (1991) the marketing mix evolved to become the prevalent *"taken for granted"* (p. 322) paradigm of transactional marketing with meaning encoded, practitioners and academics alike promptly embraced the mix paradigm (Constantinides, 2014). Yet developments within the commercial landscape and changes in consumer behaviour urged marketers to explore new theoretical approaches. A significant change that has emerged as a result of this is that marketers have become increasingly aware of the problems inherent in attempting to predict

consumer behaviour strictly by demographic factors such as gender, age, occupation, social class, income, education, or other kinds of statistical analysis (Amine, & Smith, 2009) as a basis for developing a marketing mix. Instead, marketing scholars and practitioners are now more aware of cultural and social schemas on the behaviour of consumers (Arnould, 2006; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; 2007; Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995). Therefore, in contemporary marketing philosophy, marketers claim to be focused on customer centric orientation, that is, customers are the centre of the marketing process (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Kotler, 2003; Payne, 1994). This marketing paradigm shift acknowledges the evolution of branding and consumer culture paradigms, each of which has underpinned the progressive evolution from selling to the co-creation of cultural resources (Canniford; 2011; Holt, 1995, 1997, 2002; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Rosenbaum-Elliot, Percy, & Pervan, 2011). Acknowledging this changing role in the marketplace, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000a) introduced the co-creation concept, where customers and producers interact and largely collaborate beyond the price system that traditionally mediates supply-demand relationships. Although this is not a novel idea in the marketing domain, it is a new field of enquiry within the marketisation of the HE sector. The evolution of branding, consumer culture and the co-creation of value in the context of HE presents an opening for a better exploration of the sector. That is, the co-creation of value is viewed in terms of a cultural framework that focuses on how student consumers perceive, interpret, understand, and interact with the market offering (Holt, 2002).

In terms of the HE context, the relevance of this approach lies in its ability to explain what constitutes social reality for student consumers. Since interactions shape consumers' identity construction they perceive among the signs in a system, these signs form consumers' perceptions rather than reflecting a reality that already exists.

Thus, according to Peñaloza & Venkatesh (2006, p. 311) this happens through a process and via interactions which construct meaning *"prior to, during and after the actual exchange and use(s) take place"*, ultimately, across the consumer journey. The notion of brands as sets of signs, with meaning produced by the relationship between those signs, is a useful concept for reflecting on how brands work in postmodern society and higher education, specifically, for uncovering the student consumers' brand meaning co-creation journey. Understanding customer experiences and the customer journey over time is vital for mapping consumers' creation of brand meaning in service brands (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

While there is a wealth of research describing the evolution of modern branding to postmodern branding in the commercial sector, according to other researchers (Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri, & Pich, 2016; Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, Nguyen, & Wilson, 2016) little is known about the co-creation of brand meaning in the English HE sector. This is largely because many universities appear to rely on modern forms of marketing, which is in contrast to most contemporary commercial organisations where consumer centric strategies of marketing such as co-creation are well established. Furthermore, it is typically recognised in the commercial marketing and branding literature that brand meaning is co-created prior to purchase for goods (Levy, 1959; Vargo & Lusch 2004a) but as university branding is a fairly recent concept within the services literature there is little known relating to brand meaning creation. Therefore, English HE now represents an increasingly relevant context in which to explore contemporary consumer issues (Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014) as the growing complexity of bodies of knowledge promotes an ever-increasing fragmentation within and among English universities. This thesis draws on the theory of co-creation and meaning making to understand postmodern consumer culture in HE

branding, particularly the co-creative and experiential nature of brand meaning and identity.

1.3 Researchable Question and Research Objectives

The aim of this thesis is to explore: *"how brand meaning is co-created in the postmodern era by understanding consumer awareness of branding in the English HE market".*

In order to answer the research question this thesis will:

- Explore the extant literature on modern branding, postmodern branding and the theory of co-creation in the commercial sector to understand how a co-creative framework can contribute to an understanding of brand meaning making in the English HE environment.
- Conduct three studies, which map the student consumer longitudinal journey focussing on prior to purchase, initial purchase and a more established purchase stage.
- Critically evaluate the findings taken from the three studies and demonstrate how the constant iterations between student consumers, consumers groups, the university brand and the marketplace evolves during the lived brand experience and continuously transforms, creates and manifests student consumers' brand meaning co-creation as a process.
- Present contributions from the thesis that recommend HE marketers in practice should move away from modernist and one dimensional marketing strategies and place greater emphasis on relationship management and cultural approaches to branding. Offer direction for future HE branding research that should focus on mapping brand meaning making as a process with other

stakeholder groups such as alumni, as well as taking into account the influence of clearing day activities on students' prior perceptions of the brand.

Research Questions for each stage of the journey:

Study 1 – To what extent do the initial perceptions of prospective student's brand meaning making activities, during the university choice stage of the student journey influence how brand meaning informed choice.

Study 2 - How do early perceptions of student consumers purchase experiences, including the culture, identity and the initial lived experiences with the brand influence brand meaning co-creation.

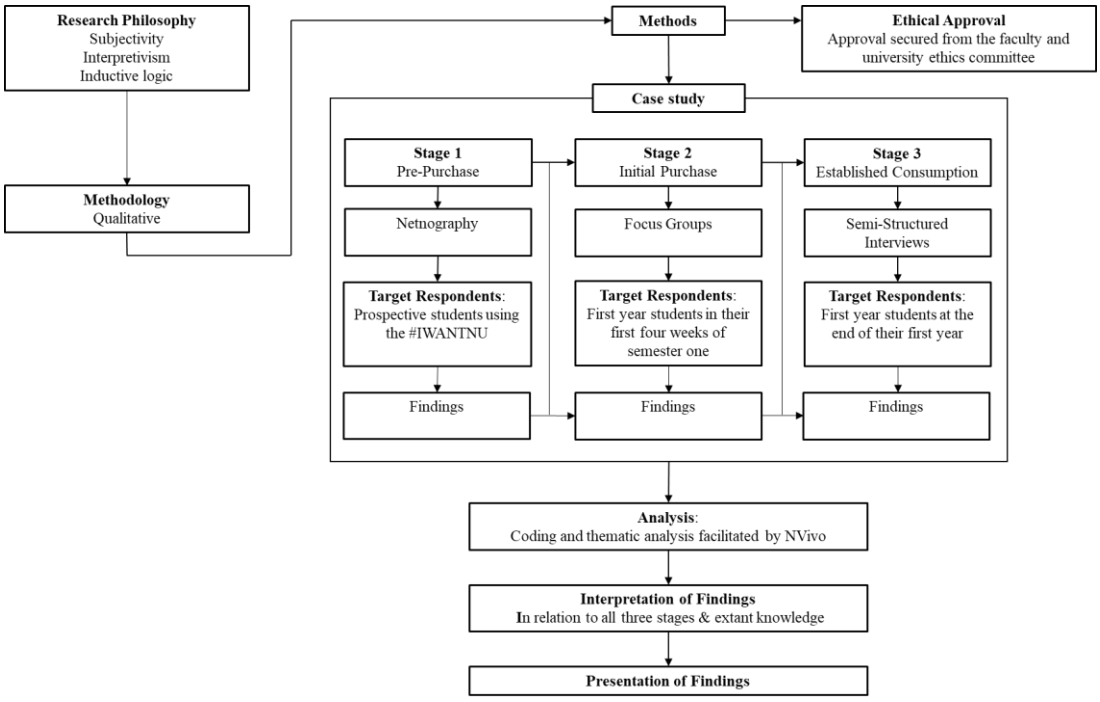
Study 3 – To what extent do the experiences of student consumers further on in their university brand journey, as they gain further brand knowledge and become socialised influence brand meaning co-creation.

1.4 Research Methodology

To address the research question, this thesis adopts an interpretive research design, using a case study. The thesis uses a three-stage approach, which maps the student consumer's undergraduate HE journey to explore co-creation of brand meaning. This longitudinal journey evolves across key stages that include pre-purchase, arrival on campus and the end of the student consumers' first full year. The thesis data collection commenced with a study that focused on student consumer pre-arrival discussions, stage one (as shown in Figure 2). It became clear that brand meaning prior to purchase was emerging on a continuum along a longitudinal journey, therefore a second (arrival on campus) and third stage (end of the first academic year) were required in order to explore brand meaning further and answer the research question. To clarify, it is not

the intention of this thesis to suggest that brand meaning stops evolving after the end of the first year of the undergraduate journey. However, it is important to acknowledge that post first year is beyond the scope of the current thesis, which sought to explore the initial 'emergence' of brand meaning in the HE environment and how this influenced student consumers' choice of university. The target sample for this thesis were prospective and first year undergraduate students. Qualitative data was collected using netnography in Stage One, focus group interviews for Stage Two and semi-structured interviews for Stage Three. This was analysed using a coding and a thematic analysis approach facilitated by NVivo. This is shown diagrammatically in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Summary of Research Design



1.5 Thesis Structure

Chapter 1 has outlined the rationale for the research and introduced the research topic, following on from which the theoretical context is provided by an immersive literature review in the next chapter. The purpose of **Chapter 2** is to conduct a review of the

extant literature in the areas of modern branding, postmodern branding and co-creation theory, including the evolution of such concepts in marketing and the less established exploration in the context of HE. Additionally, in **Chapter 2**, the context of this study is described by exploring the existing marketisation of English HE literature. **Chapter 3** outlines the philosophical perspective that delivers the direction of this thesis, with a detailed appreciation of the underlying principles of interpretivism. From here, the rationale for the data collection is presented detailing the specifics of data collection at each stage of the student consumer journey. **Chapter 4** presents the analysis and interpretation of the findings from each of the stages of the journey. **Chapter 5** brings the findings from the three stages together to present contributions from the study. The thesis concludes with a review of the contributions to knowledge both theoretical and practical to draw a critical review to the thesis and highlight potential areas for future research.

1.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter commenced by providing an overview of the emergence and development of marketing and branding in the English HE sector. From here, the theoretical concept of co-creation was introduced and highlighted as a gap in the research context of branding in HE, this provided a foundation to the study. The overall researchable question and objectives were reviewed along with the significance of this research. The chapter concluded by providing an outline for the remainder of the thesis. This chapter has provided a background to the research, including a rationale for the research conducted and a brief overview of the research context.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 Chapter Two Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the marketisation of English HE. The chapter then develops through a review of the contributions made by modern and postmodern marketing and branding theory in the commercial sector, focusing on the received and negotiated views of brand meaning. The specific purpose of this chapter is to explore the extant literature on value co-creation and its contribution to brand meaning. Co-creation theory is well established in the commercial marketing sector but less well explored within the HE literature. Therefore, this chapter aims to understand how a co-creative approach can provide a useful framework for understanding brand meaning in the HE environment. The chapter concludes by developing these ideas in the HE environment.

2.1 Introduction to the Marketisation of HE

According to Foskett (2010), marketisation requires the use of market mechanisms as a justification for expanding HE effectively and efficiently, by exposing the HE sector to a competitive market place (Falconer & McLaughlin, 2000). The term 'market' is adopted throughout the literature on marketing higher education to describe the contemporary HE industry (Brown, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Nevertheless, typically speaking from an economic perspective a market is *"a*

mechanism through which buyers and sellers interact to determine prices and exchange goods and services" (Samuelson & Nordhaus 2009, p. 26). Therefore, from a HE standpoint, it concerns efforts to put the provision of HE on a market basis where supply and demand are balanced via pricing strategies (Brown & Carasso 2013). Hence, in a commercial setting, the market is an exchange tool for commodities that balances supply and demand frequently through price adjustments, these price modifications influence the behaviour of both consumers and providers, concluding with an agreement on the terms of the exchange. As a result, price adjustments encourage competition between providers, which in turn influences supply and demand.

However, for a market to exist there has to be commodities (Barnett, 2000; Naidoo & Williams, 2015) and as with many commercially applied terms in HE, 'commodity' is frequently contested in the HE sector (Miller, 2010; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). The market and commodity are not straightforward, this is because it is not always clear what is being bought and sold in the higher education environment and therefore it does not necessarily mean the creation of a market in the sale and purchase of academic education from a producer to a consumer. In response to this, researchers (Barnettt, 2010; Naidoo, 2008; Naidoo, Shankar & Veer, 2011) have recognised that 'quasi-market' might be a more appropriate term to describe what is happening in the HE sector. This suggests on the demand side that quasi-markets are designed to create consumer choice, which motivates providers to respond to those choices. But, in 'quasi-markets' the emphasis is still on providers responding to purchasers demands for lower pricing and value for money (Bartlett & Le Grand, 1993; Dill, 1997; Hemsley-Brown, 2011). Furthermore, distinct from commercial markets, consumers in HE do not pay directly for the service or commodity, therefore the well-established

commercial pricing strategy which persuades consumers to purchase the higher-priced goods in a market where there are similar or lower priced substitutes available is non-existent in the HE market. Thus, English universities have not adopted pricing strategies as a differentiating factor even though differentiation has traditionally been very much associated with obtaining a price premium (Sharp & Dawes, 2001). This is because of the implications this has on quality perception. Therefore, with price not being a factor, English universities were required to consider other aspects of the marketing mix.

The marketing mix emerged from the single P (price) of microeconomic theory (Goi, 2009). Often referred to as the 4Ps, the components of the marketing mix (i.e. product, price, place and promotion) can be altered and varied from brand to brand. Part of the marketing mix principle is the idea that differentiation (a pervasive feature of modern markets) makes the product more desirable and therefore the brand outperforms rival brands in the provision of a feature(s) (Sharp & Dawes, 2001). Consequently, the marketing mix provides a basis for brand differentiation by offering consumers persuasive motives to consider purchasing one brand in preference to another (Keller, 2009). In fact, the marketing mix framework has governed marketing research and practice (Grönroos, 1994) as a creator of differentiation since it was introduced in the 1950s (McCarthy, 1964). Therefore, it is common practice among researchers and practitioners to differentiate using the components of the marketing mix to change a brand's competitive position (Grönroos, 1994). However, the marketing mix used in this way in the English higher education sector imposes limitations for universities. This is because, the discussions on price in HE have highlighted clear issues with quality perceptions, furthermore, product in the HE environment is a contested term as it is not always clear what is being bought and sold. While place is vital to many

student consumers choice, universities can do little to control where they are located. Therefore, by using the modernist approach, which is assumed by the marketing mix, that is, marketers as cultural engineers, organising how people think and feel through branded commercial products (Holt, 2002), English university brands are truly only able to adopt promotional strategies as a means of differentiating their brands to attract student consumers.

In addition to this, Sandel (2012) notes this consumerism which plagues contemporary society is also indicative of the reach of this market-oriented thinking into aspects of life traditionally governed by non-market norms, this he argues has led to the creation of a consumer society, a market driven society in which the purchasing and marketing of goods and services is the most important social and economic activity (Rhoades, 1987). This notion of consumerism shifts attention to the contentious role of branding as part of the marketisation of English HE (Chapleo, 2011). Predominantly, two schools of thought exist in this area, that is, 1. critics of marketing approaches in HE and 2. the desirability of marketing approaches in HE, with one side a determined sceptic of marketing, while the other an accepting advocate of marketing in HE (Maringe & Gibbs, 2008). Central to this debate is the role that HE plays in postmodern society, this includes the philosophical contradiction of whether HE should produce wisdom or utility (Lobkowicz, 1983). As such, one side of the debate (the advocates) maintain that because marketing offers a way in which value can be exchanged and delivered, education needs to embrace the marketing philosophy as an integral part of its development and delivery (Maringe & Gibbs, 2008). However, an alternative view (the sceptics) insist universities should not be in the business of marketing (Bunzel, 2007) and that education should never be commoditised, because a move towards consumable education through modularisation, semesterisation and

self-directed learning creates a market view which turns students into consumers and educators into services providers (Chapleo, 2011; Gibbs, 2001). This, according to Gibbs (2001) escapes the objective that higher education should contribute to the social wellbeing of its society, and therefore this ought to be preserved outside the market (Chapleo, 2011).

Irrespective of which side of the marketisation debate certain arguments are positioned, it is clear that vast sums of money are designated to university branding activity (Chapleo, 2011; Jevons, 2006), and while the influence of market forces have been acknowledged, whether the structure of HE should be a quasi-market, state controlled or a direct response to competitive forces is a discussion that has informed this thesis, but is not within the scope of exploration (Barnett, 2010; Hemsley-Brown, 2011; Maringe and Gibbs, 2008; Naidoo, 2008; Naidoo, Shankar & Veer, 2011). What is of concern in the contemporary environment is that market forces and other traditional forms of competition have radically altered the governance of HE (Doherty, 2007) and one of the most significant transformations of marketisation and branding in the sector has been the reconceptualisation of students as consumers of HE (Naidoo & Williams, 2015).

2.1.1 Students as Consumers

One of the most prevalent debates within the marketisation of HE has been increasing interest in redefining the relationship between institutions and their students (Svensson & Wood, 2007). With escalating fees paid by the student the concept of the student consumer emerged (Eagle & Brennan, 2007). This is because the contemporary university in which students construct their student identities has been formed within an economically motivated political agenda in which budgetary restrictions determine pedagogical decisions (Lawrence, 2001). Debate surrounding this area is divided by

competing ideological positions, with one side of the argument suggesting *"as students in higher education are expected to pay an increasing share of the costs of their tuition, so there is an increasing tendency to refer to students as customers"* (Eagle & Brennan, 2007 p .1). Yet, others have argued that to position the student as a customer is detrimental to quality and academic standards, and degrades student learning (Molesworth et al., 2010). Therefore, failing to acknowledge these opposing ideological positions results in a naïve, over simplistic implementation of the 'student-as-customer' notion. Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that student consumers are just one group of multiple stakeholders of the university brand. Chapleo and Simms (2010) indicate stakeholder analysis is a dynamic issue for universities, specifically because HE organisations success is often contingent on an even broader range of 'customers' than is the case in many private sector organisations. As a result, stakeholders will own multiple diverse meanings about a university and therefore this has implications for building a university brand meaning.

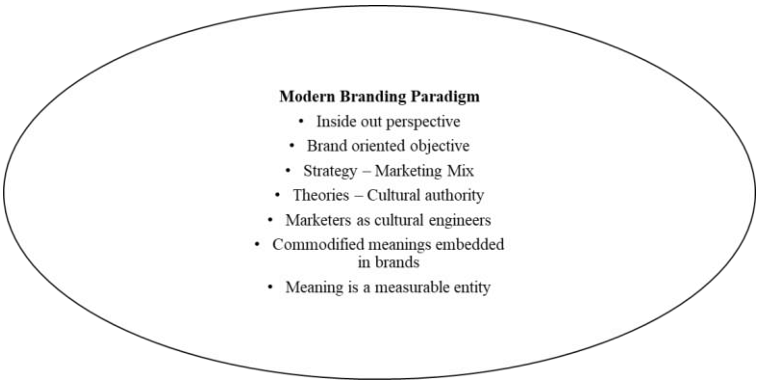
A detailed examination of whether students should be treated as consumers has been explored in other research; as such, a debate will not be provided here (see Eagle & Brennan 2007 for finer details). Put simply, it is clear that students are the direct and immediate consumers of HE as they pay for a service and they are identified as the users of this service, hence, the term 'student as consumer' will be used throughout this thesis to refer to student behaviour as primary clients and stakeholders of HE. Ultimately, as De Chernatony (2010a) argues, consumers position the brand and students are the direct consumers of higher education, therefore understanding consumers heterogeneous interpretations of the university is worthy of exploration in seeking to extend knowledge in HE branding.

The rise of particular developments relating to student consumerism has been brought about by contemporary consumer society conditions. It is well established that in consumer society, hyperreality (where simulations, signs and images seemingly constitute the world) is evident across the entire marketing spectrum (Dholakia & Fırat, 2018), because consumers are exposed to endless signs and simulations, especially from marketing milieus (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). What this means in HE is that student consumers, the target audience for HE, have always lived in a consumer society, they only know consumption through brands, and these brands play a central role in supplying meanings and values to their personal and social world (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998; McCracken, 1987; Mick & Buhl, 1992). Consumption therefore has become the defining feature of consumer culture (Holt, 2002) and for that reason cannot be ignored.

2.2 Modern Marketing and Branding

In this section, (as shown in Figure 3) the theoretical basis of modern marketing and branding is considered, before the foundational tenets of modern consumption and brand meaning are explored. As consumption has emerged as a central feature of contemporary society, it is important to consider how the shift in paradigms has influenced the meaning of brands. Therefore, to illustrate this paradigm shift the literature review chapter focuses on three main parts (modern and postmodern branding theory and value co-creation) and discusses dominant concepts which have evolved in marketing across these domains e.g. the marketing mix, segmentation and differentiation. These will be re-visited in each section of the figure for the purpose of: 1. Mapping the evolution of modern to postmodern for co-creation paradigms of marketing and 2. Understanding this influence on the construction of brand meaning in the contemporary environment.

Figure 3. Theoretical contribution of study; a review of the modern branding paradigm



In the commercial environment, as competitive market economies expanded, the need for product differentiation intensified, therefore, brands became more ubiquitous and instrumental. Thus, the initial role of branding was to brand a product for the purpose of distinguishing that product from similar ones offered by other companies, to allow consumers to differentiate between goods and question the product benefits to inform the decision-making process (Keller, 1993). But, advances in technology and an increasingly competitive environment have propelled the need for companies to add value to their products, ensuring brands are not merely symbols of material quality. They are mediums of ideas, symbolic values (Gardner & Levy, 1955), and personalities/identities (Aaker, 1997), which have evolved into the complex marketing systems that utilise dynamic brand mediums in contemporary society (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015).

The rising concept of the brand helped marketers to define their buyer segments (Bastos & Levy, 2012): branding processes, that is, a way of affecting the perception of the offering beyond its function, are a direct consequence of the marketing strategies' product differentiation and market segmentation (Smith, 1956). In his

influential paper on marketing strategies for imperfect competition conditions, Smith (1956) founded these two principles of marketing philosophy. Smith (1956) argues that, in an environment where there is diversity in supply and consumer demand, companies need to adopt either product differentiation or market segmentation. Both strategies relate to a context of imperfect competition where persuasive marketing strategies are required because there are more products/services available than consumers to buy them. Therefore, there is a need to adapt demand to supply, through modifying the offer to the consumer needs and wants by assuming a heterogeneous environment made up of several homogeneous sub-markets (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Put simply, market segmentation is the division of the market into smaller segments of consumers with similar defining characteristics and needs (Kotler & Keller, 2013). Consequently, developed as a logical extension of the marketing concept, the basic proposition behind market segmentation is that within an overall market there may be groups of consumers with similar wants and needs but whose wants and needs are different from other groups. Smith (1956) acknowledged segmentation's close relationship to product differentiation, but argued that the two strategies had opposite orientations: where differentiation focuses on the supply side and aims to align demand with the supplier's priorities via advertising and promotion i.e. management of the marketing mix, segmentation is demand-side oriented, accepting marketplace heterogeneity as a given, and customising product design and marketing tactics to the satisfaction of distinct customer requirements. Therefore, even though there has been much confusion surrounding the use of the terms in the extant literature (Dickson & Ginter, 1987), segmentation and product differentiation are viewed as alternatives rather than complements.

Markets are segmented in a variety of ways, some of these ways, however, will be more useful for answering marketing questions and developing marketing strategy than others. Traditionally, variables are used to classify consumers into segments; marketers use one or a combination of the main segmentation variables: demographic, geographic, behavioural and psychographic. This approach allows companies to tailor their product/service offerings and marketing mix to the group of customers most likely to purchase their offers (Yankelovich & Meer, 2006). When the producer has decided which target segment/s to form a communicative relationship with, they need to develop a specific marketing strategy for that group of consumers (Kara & Kaynak, 1997; Smith, 1956; Wind, 1978). The segments selected will act as a guide as to which marketing strategies the producer should employ (Smith, 1956; Wind, 1978). Similarly, Smith (1956) states that the segment selected will also inform the producer's choice of which products they should make available to the target market.

The principle of differentiation is that the marketplace has evolved from being seller orientated to buyer-orientated (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Within a buyers' market there is an abundance of similar products, this provides the consumer with choice, or the illusion of choice, of which goods to consume (Goodyear, 1996). The notion of consumer choice compels producers to adopt a marketing strategy designed to persuade consumers to consume one producer's products or type of product, rather than those offered by its competitors (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Drucker, 1955; 2007; Gardner & Levy, 1955; Goodyear, 1996). Thus, as a marketing strategy this enables suppliers to differentiate their product from other similar products (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Drucker, 1955; 2007; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003).

Early seminal theorists such as Drucker (1955; 2007) describe the purpose of marketing as the simultaneous and interwoven creation of a market and the producer's

response to the needs of that market with a product that provides benefits that are of value to the consumer. Thus, managing and meeting the needs of consumers is central to the development of marketing philosophy. Kotler & Armstrong (2010, p. 26) state that *"simply put, marketing is managing customer relationships"*. Modern marketing, therefore, is concerned with a relationship, where the producer creates value for the customer, and receives something of value in return (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). The emphasis is then on what the firm can produce for the consumer. Central to this relationship is the marketing mix (De Chernatony, 1993; Goodyear, 1996; Levy, 1981). As the fundamental element of an organisation/brand's communication process (Goodyear, 1996), the marketing mix is the most widely accepted, but increasingly criticised as an overly simplistic paradigm within strategic marketing management. Consisting of McCarthy's (1960) '4Ps' (product, price, place, promotion) combined with Borden's (1965) marketing mix (Hyman, 2004), the 'marketing mix' is a conceptual framework employed by marketers to communicate the encoded meaning potentials of their brand, to the most extensive consumer segment possible. From its inception, the marketing mix has eventually become the prevalent 'taken for granted' paradigm of transactional marketing and meaning encoding, according to Grönroos (1991, p. 322). Traditionally, while mass production pervaded consumer behaviour research, consumers were viewed as rational decision makers and consumer behaviour analysis focused on the use of behaviour principles, usually gained experimentally (Louviere & Woodworth, 1983), to interpret human economic consumption to identify consumer needs (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Therefore, with its focus on an economic approach, the objective of the marketing mix is to develop interwoven strategies that act like a mix to encourage as many consumers as possible to purchase, whilst expending the minimal marketing budget by the brand (Heding, Knudtzen &

Bjerre, 2009). In this way a marketing strategy is financially orientated and unresponsive to any consumer feedback, except a decline in sales (Grönroos, 1991).

Relatedly, although the 4Ps framework employs the concept of a consumer orientation, by starting the marketing ideas from the target market, producing goods and services which can satisfy customers' needs and desires, promoting and distributing goods and services to customers (Kotler, 2003), it is arguable that the 4Ps paradigm limits the ability of consumers to co-create value. Many critical marketing theorists, such as Grönroos (1989, 1991), have suggested that the marketing mix is internally oriented, and does not consider fully customer behaviour. Hence, the mix is largely concerned with the processes of make-and-sell or production-and-distribution (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a), regards customers as passive, does not allow for interaction, and thus cannot truly capture relationships. Levitt (1960) described this as marketing myopia, an approach that focuses on fulfilling the immediate needs of the company through sales rather than responding to consumers' desires.

Despite the criticisms of the marketing mix, there is broad consensus within the marketing literature that it is the foundation of all of the branding paradigms (see De Chernatony, 1993; Goodyear, 1996; Holt, 1997, 2002; Levy, 1981). Companies tend to base their strategies on the same framework and the most successful is whoever can make better use of the 4Ps than their respective competitors. However, the marketing mix is limited to explaining the sender-orientated marketing strategies adopted by brands. While the brand owner's objective is to create differentiation through the brand, it is the consumer's intention to consume the brand for what it may bring in terms of meaning and value to consumption, as De Chernatony (2010b, p. 30) posits *"brands are complex offerings that are conceived by organizations but ultimately reside in consumers' minds"*. As such, the act of branding a product must focus on the

place it occupies in the minds of the consumer, therefore, the 4Ps is the start not the end of the marketing toolkit.

2.2.1 The Evolution of the Modern Branding Process

Branding a product is one of the oldest techniques in marketing. Evidence of branding activity can be traced at least to the middle-ages, where brands were used as an effective method of differentiating craftsmen's output (De Chernatony, 2010a; Stride, 2006). The term brand is derived from the Old Norse brandr' and means to burn the mark of the creator onto the product, to signify the producer made the product, in a certain place at a certain time (Stobart, 2016). The term originates from the ritual of applying hot irons to burn marks on livestock and other goods to certify to their quality and to assign ownership (Aaker, 1991).

Significant changes in marketing ideology post World War Two marked the rise of a customer orientation and thus a rise of brands that producers and consumers use as symbols and differentiation marks (Levy & Luedicke, 2013). Levy challenged economic assumptions about brands questioning the supposed functional orientation of consumers (Levy 1959) and suggested that although marketing is about satisfying wants and needs, creating value for the consumer through the exchange process entails more than just necessity (Levy, 1981, 1999). Gardner and Levy (1955, p. 2) suggested *"a greater awareness of the social and psychological nature of products"* was required because meanings employed to differentiate among manufacturers of a product are complex, and can only be understood through the idea of a brand image. That is, consumers buy a brand for the meanings it has, not just for its physical attributes and functionality (Gardner & Levy, 1955). Levy (1959, p. 118) makes the claim that objects of consumption are seen as vehicles for the symbolic function of communicating and creating meaning for consumers: *"People buy things not only for*

what they can do, but also for what they mean". Levy acknowledges a move away from the traditional focus of the product's functional attributes and points directly to the symbolic meaning of consumption. Evidently, Levy (1959) is referring to the commercial sector when making these claims and his ideas relate to product symbolism. However, in the context of a service brand such as HE, it is not so clear how this meaning is formed through institutional and consumer subsystems (Hirschman, 1986). As such, an understanding of how a product (more specifically, a commodity) evolves into a brand is required before cultural meanings in service organisations can be fully explored.

The first modern brand based products as they are known today appeared around the same time as the factory; the industrial revolution and its emerging mass production generated an escalating number of commodities that became more freely available to the masses (Klein, 1999). It was not only an increasing number of different products that became available, but also a growing number of similar products with different styles. According to Klein (1999) when goods began to be produced in factories, not only were entirely new products being introduced but also old products, even basic staples, were appearing in strikingly new forms. The market was flooded with uniform mass produced virtually indistinguishable products, which made competitive branding a necessity of the machine age. The machine age was an era around the late 1800s and early-mid 1900s that observed growth in production machinery and resulted in the mass production of high-volume goods (Toffler & Toffler, 1993). A similar process has happened in the contemporary English HE environment, governance of HE has been transformed, this has led to widening participation and increased supply from universities, which has resulted in a market driven sector where league tables influence decision making. As a consequence, similar products (e.g., degree programmes) have

emerged across the sector, making it difficult to distinguish between the universities delivering the programmes, hence the product is not distinctive and therefore a strong brand is required to assist differentiation.

The concept of differentiating a brand, by encoding it with potential symbolic meanings, has existed since the advent of production and consumption (De Chernatony, 1993). But, it was not until Gardner and Levy's (1955) seminal theory of branding that the significance of symbolically encoded meanings on consumer interpretation was acknowledged. Gardner and Levy (1955) demonstrated that consumers create symbolic brand images and more complex perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about brands than marketers had previously acknowledged. In the same vein, Holt (2002) argues that consumers have taken up a productive role in the process of meaning creation in a brand, in that they have been *"investing commodities with more particularized meanings and using them in idiosyncratic ways"* (Holt, 2002, p. 71). This active role in the creation of meaning generated new ideas in the realm of brand management, specifically for the relationship the consumer has with the brand.

The way consumers relate to and interact with the brand both determines and is determined by what the brand means to its consumer, it is an ongoing, dynamic and multifaceted experience (Batey, 2015). The multifaceted relationships that have developed between consumers and brands have presented both academics and practitioners philosophical implications for understanding consumers' perceptions and activities (Belk, 1988; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Fournier & Lee, 2009) such as the importance of building strong consumer–brand relationships and its increasing prominence in today's marketplace. This is because brands have become an increasingly important component of meaning creation in consumption (Chang &

Chieng, 2006) and a key marketing priority for most companies (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000; Kapferer 2005).

The development of this focus on brand meaning brings into question traditional approaches to branding. Approaches that place emphasis on mass media techniques seem problematic in the current marketplace where consumers have access to massive amounts of information about brands, products and companies (Taylor, 2014). This is because traditional branding assumptions and interpretations are often deep rooted in a modernist managerial culture and have been confined to descriptions such as *"the managerial practice of building, managing, and measuring the equity of a product or services identified by the brand"* (Muzellec & McDonagh 2007, p. 2). Therefore, brand management has frequently been discussed and perceived in terms of *'commercial motivation'* and the *'profit motive'* (Holt, 2002, p. 87). As Kapferer (1994 p. 1) wrote, "*the primary capital of many businesses is their brands"* and *"with a strategy and a consistent, integrated vision, [t]his identity must be defined and managed"*. Likewise, Aaker (1996) claims that a company's primary source of competitive advantage is the brand and this should be viewed as a strategic asset. Therefore, it is clear in modern brand studies (e.g., Barone, Miniard, & Romeo 2000; Inman & Zeelenberg, 2002; Van Osselaer & Alba, 2003) that the central idea for achieving profit has been to shape and control passive consumer desires and actions, this was also demonstrated in Smiths (1956) thoughts on product differentiation and market segmentation.

2.2.2 The Received View of Brand Meaning

A fundamental premise of modern marketing thought and achieving profit is that segmentation leads to targeting, which leads to positioning, which then leads to the development and understanding of branding messages (Puntoni, Schroeder, & Ritson,

2010). The act of transferring meaning through these messages is one of the most important and confounding activities in marketing (McCracken, 1986; Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008a & b). One prevailing message transmission assumption is that meaning exists in the text, represented as unproblematic, as it engages objectified meaning structures embedded in the arrangements of texts, symbols and social practices, which remain independent of the interpreting mind (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008b). Central to this logic is that clear and unambiguous messages are designed specifically for particular target segments, and in most instances the traditional assumption is that only one key meaning is encoded in a message and is therefore likely appropriated (Puntoni et al., 2010). This received view on brand meaning is profoundly embedded in the objectivist information processing and cognitivist theories of consumer behaviour. Within this frame, the brand holds ontological status explicitly as a cognitive understanding: the brand exists in the mind of the consumer (Ries, Trout, & Askey, 1986) as a knowledge structure of brand-relevant information (Allen, Fournier, & Miller 2008; Keller & Lehmann, 2003). Moreover, it was thought that the meaning of messages resides in the words and receivers interpret these in a uniform manner. Brand positioning theory helps the manager select specific associations for emphasis in the knowledge web (Allen et al., 2008; Keller, 1993, 2003). Brand knowledge is assumed shared by all members of the target audience such that there exists one collectively held meaning for the brand (Allen et al., 2008; Scott & Lane, 2000). Brand owners are granted control over brand image creation such that the shared knowledge, which comes to reside in consumers' minds, is the intended meaning for the brand (Allen et al., 2008). Evidently, consumers are simply viewed as passive receivers of these meanings (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a) with brand meaning managerially determined.

According to Ringberg and Reihlen (2008), the successful act of transferring meaning relies on an alignment of complex interpretive processes between the sender and receiver. A common misconception about the process of meaning making is that communication is a linear and continuous trajectory, consisting of an accumulation of signs, which are organised progressively and subsequently in syntagmatic chains (Picione & Freda, 2016). Scott (1994 p. 474), in summarising the cognitive perspective, points out that *"involvement does not represent the reader's active participation and interpretation as it treats outcome in the reader as either information correctly/incorrectly processed or as positive/negative attitude"*. Therefore, rather than assigning understanding through consumer variance in the sense making process, comprehension is attributed to consumers' level of involvement (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008).

2.2.2.1 Re-conceptualising Linear Approaches to Meaning Making

Hall's (1973, 1977, 1980) seminal theory of encoding/decoding also conceptualised this received view of meaning making, where a message is encoded with a preferred meaning by the producer and decoded in a sociocultural context by the reader. According to Hall (1973; 1980), the transfer of meaning was 'structured in dominance' by the encoder (e.g., the brand manager) and the decoder (the consumer) could only choose to accept the dominant position, negotiate or oppose it, but they could not create individual meanings (Hall, 1973; 1980, p. 91). Therefore, according to Hall (1986, p. 128) *"If no meaning is taken, there can be no consumption"*. Although Hall's original model had moved away from such linear conceptions of message transfer and meaning, and highlighted *"the importance of active interpretation within relevant codes"* (Hall 1980, p. 136), as well as noting that *"decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings"*, the model was still unsuccessful in capturing the active role of the

receiver. The theory of dominance in the transfer of meaning has since been revised by Hall (1990); he states that in these new times of postmodernity, the decoder now co-creates the meaning of a product. Hall (1994, p. 253) highlights the importance of getting away from *"the notions of media texts as 'transparent' bearers of meaning"* that underpin content analysis alongside an emphasis on more active conceptions of the audience and reading, and a focus on ideology away from ideas of 'mass culture'.

Hall explains that his revised work was positioned against the "*traditional empirical, positivistic models"* that is, against a *"particular notion of content as preformed and fixed meaning or message which can be analysed in terms of transmission from sender to receiver"* (Hall, 1994, p. 253). Hall (1994, p. 253), described it as an interruption to a view that looks at communication in terms of the perfect transmission of meaning; going "against the grain" of a "rather over determinist model of communication". The evolution of Hall's work with others (Hall, Du Gay, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997) revised the encoding/decoding model to produce the circuit of culture model. This focused on a re-evaluation of how meaning is co-created in the postmodern sociocultural environment. The circuit of culture model represents meaning-making as a cycle of communication, rather than a transfer of meaning. Hall et al., (1997) claim that the marketer and consumer are both involved, not only in the decoding of potential meanings, but also the encoding of different potential meanings. Rather than encoding/decoding being a single message and interpretation, meaning is co-created from multiple messages circulated within and by the sociocultural environment (Hall et al., 1997). Therefore, consumers being re-conceptualised as active meaning makers rather than passive recipients of marketing messages provides an alternative focus to that of the brand possessing complete control of the message, brands as cultural

artefacts have revealed alternative models of how brands become meaningful (Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

These ideas contend that consumption plays a central role in supplying meanings and values for the creation and maintenance of the consumer's personal and social world (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; McCracken, 1990; Mick & Buhl, 1992). These cultural meanings are then transferred to brands, and it is brands that are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Therefore, meaning is not delivered in the communication process, rather it is constructed within it (Anderson & Meyer, 1988). McCracken (1990, p. 178) suggests that brands are *"vital to the self-invention or self-completion of the individual"*. A consumer is not *"a ridiculous figure: an irrational slave to trivial, materialistic desires who can be manipulated into childish mass conformity by calculating mass producers"* (Slater, 1997, p. 33). Essentially, this represents two opposing schools of thought in the wider literature on brand meaning making. On the one hand resides brand management approaches, which emphasise the locus of control as the organisation (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015), with meaning transferred to the consumer and on the other hand there are socio-cultural approaches which consider brand meaning as collectively negotiated (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004b).

The review of the extant literature on modern marketing and branding has demonstrated that the use of brands has changed over the years and has developed from not only representing the product's name to now providing the product with a deeper meaning (Clare, Murphy, Cox, & Chaplin, 1992). While it is clear the original intention for brands may have mostly been to distinguish products and services from others, brands have emerged as signs of distinction for consumers, and therefore part

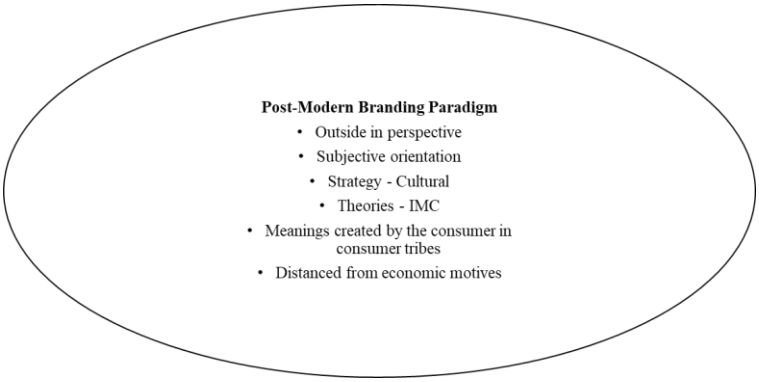
of their symbolic consumption system (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006). As this symbolic system has evolved, consumption has become not just a matter of satisfying immediate needs, brands have become important symbols that provide structure and stability to the freedom of making choices (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). Although this has been a rich area of research over the past few decades, the meanings and uses associated with the concept of brand management have been disputed as this area has developed. The traditional understanding of a brand, and the methods in which an organisation communicates its brand, is considered a product of a modernist managerial paradigm, with a typical emphasis on consistency/uniformity, control, and coherence (Brown 1995, 1999; Firat & Shultz 1997). In a short period, the processes and ideas related to branding evolved from ownership and reputation to brand image, symbolic values, and relationship partner. Postmodernism and contemporary consumer culture have challenged traditional logic with one of flexibility and openness, since consumers are no longer willing to commit or conform to any unified and consistent idea, system, or narrative (Goulding, 2000; Lyotard, 1984; Venkatesh, 1992). But this has also added complexity in understanding brand meaning and the definition of brands in contemporary consumer society.

Holt (2002) maintains that brands have become a site for consumers to channel their desires. In the symbol-rich market of postmodernity, consumers can exert control over their lives with the consumption of the symbolic meanings around them (Elliott, 1999; Thompson, 2002). Brands have thus become very accessible resources in which the consumer is not the passive recipient of the meanings of objects, but an active player in the process of their meaning making (Fournier, 1998). These ideas are rooted in the theoretical foundations of postmodernism and contemporary consumer society, which fundamentally question modernist practices (Best & Kellner 1991; Crotty 1998). For

Brown (1995), the traditional marketing paradigm is a positivist discourse based on the notion that a single, correct version of reality exists, whereas the condition of postmodernism is fundamentally opposed to this position. Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 40) share this frustration and note, *"marketing practice has become postmodern while marketing theory continues to be developed in a modernist mode"*, as such, the next section considers the influence of postmodernism and consumer culture on branding theory.

2.3 Postmodern Marketing and Branding

Figure 4. Theoretical contribution of study; a review of postmodern branding paradigm



2.3.1 Defining Postmodernism

Increasingly, a great number of consumer researchers (Brown, 1995; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2001; Holt, 1997; Kozinets, 2002; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995) have developed and continue to develop a variety of interpretive consumer research techniques, thus questioning the suitability of the positivist stance assumed by modern marketing and branding paradigms. As such, there has been a decline in the belief that: 1. there is a single reality and that humans can have knowledge of this reality; 2. there is objective universal truth; 3. there are absolutes. Modern consumption has been conceptualised

as a need driven activity and from a modern perspective, where consumers do not add value to a product, thus the functional aspect/s of a product is the focus. Because of this, studies of consumption have mainly been considered from an economic perspective, not from a cultural, naturalistic or interpretive approach to consumer activities (Brown, 1995; Cova 1996).

In the course of criticising positivism for aspiring to grasp totality, and centring around absolute reality (Crotty, 1998), scholars trace back to its problematic philosophical foundation, modernism, and propose a movement which runs to counter modernism, postmodernism, as an alternative philosophical framework for consumer studies (e.g., Brown, 1995; Elliott, 1994; Featherstone, 1988, 2007; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992; Joy & Venkatesh, 1994; Stern, 1993). Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 239) advocate, *"postmodernism exposes the limitations of modernism for the study of consumption and offers alternative perspectives that have a liberatory potential".* This liberatory potential includes abandoning the idea that absolute truth exists by embracing positive and multiple realities (Foucault, cited in Deleuze, 1988).

Postmodernism can be conceptualised as a consequence of the critical restlessness of modernism itself and represents an extension of the modernism philosophy. As Bauman (1992, p. 2) succinctly explains *"the postmodern state of mind is the radical victory of modern culture over the modern society it aimed to improve through throwing it wide open to its own potential"*. To avoid terminology confusion, there is a necessity to explain the usage of the following terms: modernity, modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism. Given the use of the prefix 'post' (after in Latin) to the concept modern, assumptions might be made regarding its logical succession. However, it is clear from debate that postmodernism does not simply imply there was

modernism and now this has been replaced by postmodernism as an anti-positivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998). Equally so, the emergence of post-positivism has not signalled the demise of positivism, there is no clear-cut boundary, therefore, the four terms of central debate here should not be considered separately; they are inextricably linked. According to Lyotard (1984), postmodern is found within modern, not in any sense apart from it. Therefore, it is modernism that shapes modernity and conversely it is modernity where the dialogue of modernism develops. Simultaneously, postmodernism drives postmodernity. While postmodernism aspires to emancipate the world from modernism, some of its discourses are still based on those of modernism (Best & Kellner, 1991).

Consequently, the postmodern critiques have not replaced the idea/ideals and values of the modern period with an alternate system or paradigm, instead, criticism is often characterised by its critique of and opposition to modernism. Postmodernism then refers to a complex set of philosophical presumptions, most of which reject modern philosophical systems that promoted the idea of rationality, positive/correct science, universalism and promotion of liberal values. Yet some extant literature even holds the position that modernity has not come to its end yet and postmodernity is only its radical phase or extension (Giddens, 1990; Jameson, 1984; Lyotard, 1984). Accordingly, the postmodern philosophy does not completely abandon the modern scientific procedures which look for objective knowledge on market research and consumer behaviour, but suggests opting for "multiple theories" (Cova, 1996; Cova & Badot, 1995; Cova, Maclaran, & Bradshaw, 2013; Goulding, 2003) to gain insights into multiple consumer realities. As Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 261) suggest: "*consumer experiences are too complex to be boxed into a single experimental moment, and the joys of doing research must be found not in the pursuit of a holy grail*

of singular knowledge but in capturing many exploratory moments". Therefore, to acquire an understanding of contemporary consumer experiences in this thesis, what needs to be valued is multiplicity, complexity and ambiguity by adopting a position which allows for knowledge to be viewed as a construction and consumer experiences to be represented in a rich and stimulating manner (Goulding, 2003). This is because such an approach to consumer research allows for an in-depth understanding of key marketing and consumer behaviour phenomena via consideration of the cultural and sociological factors that influence consumers in their everyday lives. Accordingly, Kozinets (2015) suggests that in contexts that are so multiple, complex and interrelated only human (naturalistic) intelligence and interpretation can do justice to the discernment of meaning.

The extant literature has revealed that many of the modern approaches of consumer research are conventionally grouped around the dominant principle of positivism, this has been critiqued by many scholars (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Dholakia, 1988; Fullerton, 1987; Hirschman, 1986; Holbrook & Grayson, 1986; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Mick, 1986; Peter & Olson, 1983, 1989; Sherry, 1983; Stern, 1989, 1993; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990), for being too narrow, dogmatic and unidimensional in its philosophy and its attempts to predict or identify causal linkages of consumer behaviour. That is, academics from a positivist view consider the nature of consumer behaviour as single, objective, universal, deterministic, consistent and through analysis of the world from a "scientific" and rational perspective (Goulding, 2003; Holbrook 1995; Lyotard, 1984).

The emerging ideas of postmodernism have become central to this philosophical and methodological debate. Due to the multiple disciplines that adopt the philosophical stance, postmodernism as a concept is not widely accepted or even understood, it is a

contested term (Brown 1995; Jameson, 1998) and is far from a unified and comprehensive paradigm. Thus, according to Brown (1995), it must be acknowledged that there has never really been a consensus about its exact form or actual existence, there is a lack of agreement, indeed clarity, on the nature of postmodernism and postmodernity. But, postmodern by its nature, and theories of postmodernism hold no consensus to adopt any unified definition for its term, which in reality would contradict the notion of liberatory force presented by postmodernists (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Therefore, establishing a set definition has conceptual challenges, because the very act of compiling a definitive list of characteristics works against the fluid view of reality postulated by postmodernism (Amine & Smith, 2009). Brown (1995) even goes as far as to suggest that postmodern marketing does not provide an alternative to modern marketing concepts, demolition is the only job the postmodern mind seems to be good at (Brown, 1995; Cova, 1996; Cova, & Badot, 1995; Cova, Maclaran, & Bradshaw, 2013) and therefore it is a critique, not a concept, it is an overarching philosophical stance.

Indeed, some of the individuals who have helped shape the discourse are apprehensive critics, rather than postmodern researchers. Jameson for instance (1984; 1991) regards postmodernism as *"the cultural logic of late capitalism"*. But, in line with his Marxist position Jameson (1991, p. 197) warns against *"the complacent (yet delirious) camp following celebration of this aesthetic new world"* as he suggests that the complexity differentiation of social activity claimed by postmodernists could have been understood successfully within a modernist framework. Representing a similar position to that of Jameson, Baudrillard (1984) views postmodernism as "a response to emptiness", and "the loss of meaning" (Baudrillard, 1993). Furthermore, whilst Baudrillard denies that his work is in any way postmodern, it seems evident that his

work, which offers a critique of the modernist project, makes a major contribution to the analysis of postmodern culture (Zurbrugg, 1993). His (Baudrillard) ideas on society progressed so fast it destabilized the linearity of history and his belief, just like Lyotard (1984), that there was no longer any room for metanarratives (Baudrillard, 1994). Ultimately, these philosophers who laid the foundations for postmodernism represent a pessimistic view of a 'decentred alienated subject' (Goulding, 2003, p. 153).

Conversely, postmodernism has been described as a liberatory force by Firat and Venkatesh (1995), with fragmentation central to the experience labelled by Brown (1995). What these optimistic scholars believe is that to (re)present different (self) images in fragmented moments liberates the consumer from conformity to a single image (Firat et al., 1995). It can be a rich, creative and empowering epoch in which the consumer of postmodern culture appreciates and relishes the paradox and the playfulness such fragmentation provides (Firat et al., 1995; Goulding, 2003). As such, postmodernism is a positive development that liberates human beings and opposes the oppressive aspects of modernism and modernity (Best & Kellner, 1991; Weber in Giddens, 1970), therefore, *"it is modernism which thus paradoxically lays the foundations of postmodernism by pure destruction"* (Turner, 1990, p. 11).

2.3.2 Postmodern Marketing and Consumer Society

The progression of a postmodern worldview has experienced the dominance of the mass-mediated spectacle (Baudrillard, 1983) and thus the figurative role of consumption in the contemporary life experience. Despite its contested nature, much literature suggests that postmodernism has outlived the duration of a passing fad and has evidently illustrated its powerful perspective to understand and conduct consumer research in the contemporary culturally constituted society (Best & Kellner 1991;

Featherstone 1991; Jameson 1991). Undeniably, postmodernism means different things to different scholars and their philosophical positions. Any attempt to determine the definition of 'postmodernism' will most likely dismantle the multifaceted nature of it as a phenomenon. Instead, what must be considered is how postmodernism influences the study of consumer experiences with brands both epistemologically and methodologically. Realistically, there is evidence of both alienation and liberation in consumers' everyday lives (Goulding, 2003; Simmons, 2008). Most researchers agree that postmodernism represents some kind of reaction to, or departure from, modernism and modernity (Brown, 1995) and can be used as an alternative mode of knowledge to deal with contemporary consumer society (Lyotard, 1984), an approach to contemporary society that responds to consumers' needs and experiences, rather than merely focussing on the sale of products (Levitt, 1960).

Increasingly, studies of consumption, meaning making and its outcome within contemporary contexts have evolved. Whilst the postmodern environment is not confined to marketing (Brown, 1995), consumer society and postmodern society are considered synonymous by many theorists (e.g. Brown, 1995, 2008; Baudrillard, 1988; Featherstone, 1991; Holt, 2002) regarding marketing as one of the distinguishing features of the postmodern condition (Brown, 1995). As Firat et al., (1995) note, the postmodern age is essentially a marketing age and there is an identity between marketing and postmodernity, what this identity looks like in reality is open to debate and therefore further explorations are required.

In contrast to the philosophical roots of modern marketing, postmodern marketing is characterised by conditions which challenge the grand narratives rooted in the modern, these include: fragmentation, hyperreality, reversed production and consumption, decentred subjects, and juxtaposition of opposites; these serve to underpin and

facilitate the process of exchange according to Firat and Venkatesh (1995). Increasingly, consumer society is bombarded with numerous messages, signs and images (Baudrillard, 1983; Jameson, 1991) the distinction between reality and fantasy is blurred (Brown, 1995). Postmodern (hyper) realities are simulated as collages of re-contextualised, multi-layered, multi-meaning images (Slater, 1997), consisting of the fragmentation of a market into smaller and smaller segments and therefore a greater choice of products/services to meet this increasing demand (Goulding, 2003). Thus, an individual does not need to commit to any specific project, or any particular lifestyle (Wattanasuwan, 2005). As subjects of postmodernity, consumers are de-centred into fragmented entities, with an endless flow of paradoxical juxtapositions, which takes the view beyond stable sense (Featherstone 1991; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Furthermore, this fragmented, hyperrealised postmodern consumer no longer has something 'done' to them by marketers (Brown, 2006). As Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 251) observe, they are active participants in the production of meaning, of marketing and consumption by *"finding his/her liberatory potential in subverting the market rather than being seduced by it"*. The modern promotion of certainty, universality and rationality seems unfit for acquiring meaningful knowledge of a hyperreal, fragmented and juxtaposed world that is imbued with irrationality.

What these conditions mean is as the postmodern consumer is confronted with fragmented experiences and individuals live moments without a unified meaning (Cova, 1996), postmodern (hyper) realities are simulated as collages of re-contextualised, multi-layered, multi-meaning images (Brown, 2006; Dholakia & Fırat, 2018). The image does not represent only the product, but the product represents the image. Thus, no individual needs to commit to any one moment, any specific project, any particular lifestyle, or any unified sense of being. This de-centring of the subject

leads consumers beyond individualism, in which they gather temporarily in fluid 'postmodern tribes' (Maffesoli, 1995). The aim is to liberate the construction of identity from imposed myths (Goulding, 2003). The relevance of this for the current thesis is that it brings about new ways of exploring student consumers in the HE environment, as postmodern thinkers claim that no individual needs to commit to any one moment or any specific project. Yet, student consumers enrol for three years when they make their university choice, therefore, student consumers commit to a consumption group and these groups in postmodern consumer culture play a key role for meaning and identity, this has been largely unexplored in prior HE research.

From a postmodernist perspective, consumers are no longer bound by modernist grand narratives, but instead they are free to choose from a variety of mini-narratives or metanarratives (groups within groups) (Lyotard, 1984). Therefore, they can choose how to interpret consumer goods, and marketing, to co-create their own meanings (Holt, 1997, 2002; Kates, 2001, 2002a). In line with this, Bauman (1992) argues that choice, and especially consumer choice, becomes the basis of a new idea of freedom in contemporary society; the argument being that in contemporary society the freedom of the individual is actively formed in his or her role as a consumer. Consumers become active producers of product meanings and boundaries between producers and consumption become blurred (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Therefore, in this environment, a postmodern marketer would argue that traditional market research techniques are obsolete (Holt, 1997, 2002).

It is not surprising considering the debates that have taken place thus far, that questions have emerged regarding how well modern segmentation methods work in the postmodern environment (Amine & Smith, 2009). As described by Brown (1995, p. 24) *"centeredness that is a characteristic of modernity, where individuals are*

unambiguously defined by their occupation, social class, demographics, post-code, personalities and so on has been ripped asunder in postmodernity". The underlying assumption of seminal, well established segmentation definitions such as Smith (1956), is one of stability, premised upon the belief that customers have shared characteristics, similar needs and behave in stable patterns like one another, thereby justifying segmentation according to pre-determined static categories. Whereas modernists believe that absolute truths and a universal design can explain such phenomena (Amine & Smith, 2009; Bauman, 1992; Lyotard, 1984), postmodernists reject such limits in the opportunity to understand socially constructed consumer realities. The problem is marketing to a market that cannot be segmented using modernist methods; this is further intensified in an environment such as HE where universities have adopted a widening participation agenda. Relatedly, an additional challenge includes the possibility and even desirability of differentiation for HE institutes. According to Sharp and Dawes (2001) differentiation exists when a firm's offering is preferred, over a competitors offerings, this preference supposes that there is some difference between brands and that consumers react to these differences and therefore without this preference, brands would be perfectly substitutable. But what these scholars have also argued is that in reality there are few substantial feature differences between brands. Challenging the power of differentiation, Sharp and Dawes (2001) demonstrated a distinct lack of perceptual differences between brands and queried whether differentiation really was such a unique branding objective. This is because brands work very hard to match their competitors. This is significant for HE, a sector which has been consistently reported as experiencing difficulties with differentiating in a market where providers promote similar, if not identical offerings (Jevons, 2006). As such, substantial and meaningful product feature differences

between brands is challenged and Ritson (2019) suggests that in measuring the success or failure of a brand, distinctiveness is the real driver, when a brand is distinctive it stands out, this generates awareness for the consumer when they encounter the brand or consider a purchase and thus, should be the focus of contemporary branding objectives.

Conceptually and methodologically, the challenges associated with adopting modern modes of marketing to segment consumers and provide a differentiated offering in the postmodern world have been highlighted. Calling into question the efficiency of these segmentation methods in contemporary society, Amine and Smith, (2009) argue that individual consumers increasingly escape the categorisations typical of modern segmentation. As such, a different approach, informed by postmodern thinking, promotes the need to move beyond the traditional belief that consumers have only one stable, predictable individual identity (Amine & Smith, 2009; Bennett, 1999) that influences consumption decisions. The expectation that every consumer in a group responds in the same homogenised way to marketing strategies is a simple method of categorisation, which falls short of capturing the complexities of postmodern consumers (Amine & Smith, 2009; Smith, 1956). With the emergence of postmodernism, this logic has been challenged by an overabundance of available cultural meanings and interpretive perspectives to describe the contemporary commercial environment (Kates, 2002b). It is not enough to merely group consumers based on pre-determined arbitrary descriptive data, if a segment is populated by different people who want different things, it is not a segment (Ritson, 2017). Instead, it is a tribe, (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013) that can be understood as a group of individuals connected by similar consumption values and usage, that use the social "linking value" (Cova, 1997, p. 297) of products/services to establish a community

and express identity (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011). Therefore, for the purpose of the current thesis there is a need to adopt a theoretical and methodological platform that is reflective of postmodern society and assists understanding of contemporary consumers. A theoretical perspective that addresses the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). A position which reveals the multifaceted, complex and fragmented nature of the postmodern consumer (Amine & Smith, 2009). This is even more important in the English HE environment, where there are difficulties inherent in trying to predict the behaviour of student consumers strictly by demographic factors in an ever-increasingly fragmented consumer society. Therefore, consumption is cultural and consumption processes are perhaps not universal across cultural and sub-cultural groups (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). For this reason, an exploration of student consumer behaviour from a functional/utilitarian perspective is limited. Therefore, an interpretive research approach which acknowledges that student consumers live in a culturally constituted world (Bourdieu, 1984) is required, focussing on the social and cultural symbolic meanings of consumption, rather than an economic, functional means to an end. Essentially, it is argued that postmodernity is primarily a consumer culture (Holt, 2002); this forms the foundation of this thesis, which aims to explore student consumers' consumption behaviour in the contemporary HE environment.

2.3.3 Contemporary Consumer Culture and Consumer Identity

Much of the discussion about postmodern marketing concerns the evolution of consumption practices and the contemporary consumer. Cova (1996) called postmodernity: a shift or a break with modernity: a new social order that emerges and seems to adapt marketing practices to deal with the individualised and tribalised consumption (Maffesoli, 1995). The modern proponents of certainty, universality and

rationality appear unsuitable for acquiring meaningful knowledge of a hyperreal, fragmented and juxtaposed world of a postmodern individual, that is embedded with irrationality (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). By contrast to the traditional ways of living, postmodern consumers live in a fluid and less stable set of conditions, with fragmentation central to the experience (Brown, 1995; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Firat & Shultz, 1997; Goulding, 2003) and therefore consumption becomes a means through which individuals can fill a meaningless void by creatively constructing a multitude of identities that are open to them (Firat & Ventakesh, 1995; Goulding, 2003). This lifestyle choice must relate to the other parts of the mosaic that makes up the individual's social world (Prus, 1997). The collapse of traditional socio-economic classes, synonymous with classic notions of modernity, which provided the basis of identity building, has allowed consumption, as a means of constructing and expressing identity, to become even more dominant (Goulding, 2003; Lee, 1993). The individual is therefore able to adopt a wide variety of identities in a postmodern culture, each of which has its own role to play in the particular everyday routine circumstances that an individual encounters. For example, in the English university context, this could be a student from a low-socioeconomic status aspiring to go to Oxford University because the brand has meaning and therefore the student can use this meaning to create a desired identity. This is because the postmodern consumer, as described by Firat and Venkatesh (1995) and Goulding (2003), assumes multiple and sometimes contradictory projects, experiencing a loss of commitment to either grand or singular projects, prompting cultural theorists to focus on the diversity of human experience in specific contexts (Lyotard, 1984).

2.3.3.1 Consumer Culture Theory

One of the many difficulties in talking about the grand or singular projects in postmodernity concerns its lack of coherence (Brown, 1995). Consumer culture theory (CCT) emerged in response to the limits of postmodernism as a term for interpretive consumer research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Cova et al., 2013). CCT offers a way to link the postmodern conditions to the study of consumer culture within an interpretive framework to understand the complex nature of consumer behaviour. In an attempt to address the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption, Cova et al. (2013, p. 215) claim, CCT was introduced as an alternative approach to consumer behaviour, as *"interpretive researchers denounced the search for truth"* in response to the limits and critiques of modern methodologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and ontologies in the field of marketing and consumer research (Brown, 2008, p. 226). Furthermore, consumer culture does not determine action as a causal force, it explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Goulding, 2003; Tadajewski, 2006). These clear links with postmodern society, which include systematically linking individual level meanings to different levels of cultural processes and structures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), have contributed to CCT located within the postmodern paradigm of consumer research (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) hence, the field, rather than the laboratory, becoming the natural context for CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In the HE environment, a CCT focus allows for an exploration of the intermediating role of student consumers, consumer groups and tribes in shaping the cultural processes and university brand experience. That is because CCT avoids viewing individual consumers as making rational choices in the context of free markets (Askegaard &

Linnet, 2011). Instead, the context in which consumption takes place becomes the focus. That is, individual consumers are viewed as operating within a cultural, economic and political frame that shapes and limits thoughts, feelings and actions in the postmodern environment (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 1997). Such associations have closely linked CCT with qualitative analysis of consumer perspective, as they *"actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals"* (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871). Thus, for brands in contemporary society, identity and consumer behaviour should be the focus with CCT as the tool to explore these concepts.

2.3.4 Consumption Meaning in Consumer Culture

Arnould and Thompson's (2005) synthesising approach offers marketing practitioners and researchers in the contemporary environment an opportunity to rethink consumer behaviour and focus on consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies including consumers' interpretive strategies, (Cova & Cova, 2001; Elliott, 1999, 2001; Goulding, Shankar & Elliott, 2001; Hebdige, 1979; Maclaran & Brown, 2001, 2005; O'Donohoe, 1994; Ritson & Elliott, 1999). At the centre of this exploration are consumer needs, which are based on the languages, values, and rituals of individual cultures. This is because consumption has emerged as central to the meaningful practice of everyday life, and therefore creating oneself in postmodernity is difficult to separate from consumption activities (Elliott, 1999; Slater, 1997; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Therefore, as choosing where to go to university is now viewed as a consumption activity (demonstrated by the wealth of research on students as consumers, see Eagle and Brennan, 2007), the identity projects which the

student consumers construct in the marketplace culture of the university become imperative for understanding how they create brand meaning.

Consumption choices cannot be understood without considering the cultural context in which they occur, such as the shrewd deployment of products and brands to create a desired identity, such that an individual is viewed as consuming the right stuff in the right ways (Belk et al., 1989; Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Larsen & Patterson, 2018). According to McCracken (1986), culture is the 'lens' through which the individual views phenomena, as such, it determines how the phenomena are understood and used to inform decisions. As a lens, values inherited by consumers within a culture determine how the world is apprehended, these differ from culture to culture. Based on these values, consumers from different cultures differ in their reaction towards marketing messages and brands, which leads to differences in consumption patterns. The increasingly important role of consumption in cultural life is also discussed early on by McCracken (1986), who agrees that consumption progressively became a matter for the individual rather than the family, class or local corporation. Individual preferences are themselves formed within cultures, these meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared with others. As Ferguson (1992) points out, consumption came to provide a context, a medium through which the self could be expressed. Therefore, in the pursuit of meaning in this saturated world, products, activities or beliefs are not consumed only to satisfy needs but also to carry out self-creation projects (Wattanusuwan, 2005). This identity project then, takes centre stage in representations of contemporary consumption, thus all consumer choices influence identity and come to signify it to the outside world (Miles, 1999). Relatedly, postmodern consumers seek out social spaces in which they produce their own culture and create meanings; brands are used as resources to achieve this (Holt, 2002).

The contemporary consumer is overwhelmed by the ever-increasing intensity of both lived and mediated experience (See Elliott & Wattanusuwan 1998). That is, the individual is bombarded with endless signs by the media, which "*provide individuals with the means of exploring alternative forms of life in a symbolic or imaginary mode"*, at the same time individuals engage in a variety of social relationships through "*face-to-face interaction, which provide the content of lived experience*" (Thompson, 1997 pp. 212-227). This sense of endless permeation of signs, is due in part to advances in media communication that have led to consumers in the postmodern environment receiving similar information en mass and thus being more likely to be influenced in similar ways when creating the 'self' (Gergen, 1991; Kellner, 2003). Therefore, contemporary society is in part, the fragmentation of social groups as contemporary consumers move in and out of different contexts, cultures, and sets of ideas (and/or between the different parts of themselves), they think differently. This requires individuals to fit in to one of the many fragmented groups (tribes) providing a sense of identity and individuality. As such, the individual's identity is not fixed, but in continuous process, as the boundaries between self and others, are negotiated. The contemporary self and consumption can also be illustrated by hyper-reality of postmodernism (Firat 1991, p. 70). Hyper-reality refers to consumers' ability to 'simulate' reality. The simulated reality is the perceived reality, but not the reality per se. Each product and brand has an image, this image, perceived by the consumer, may be communicated by the brand company or co-created in society. The consumers use the image to merge into their life stories/identity projects and thereby imitate reality. What this means for contemporary consumers' identity projects is that there is an adjustment of the traditional social meaning systems e.g. religion, politics and family, which has resulted in consumption filling this gap and allowing the individual to

orientate themselves around the social meaning of everyday consumption (Slater, 1997). Accordingly, consumption in postmodern society becomes a rich symbolic resource that individuals employ for the creation, maintenance and expression of both the self and group identities (McCracken, 1987), As such, in contemporary contexts, even environments such as the English university sector, the individual emerges more empowered as a consumer with enough knowledge to co-create this symbolic system of meaning.

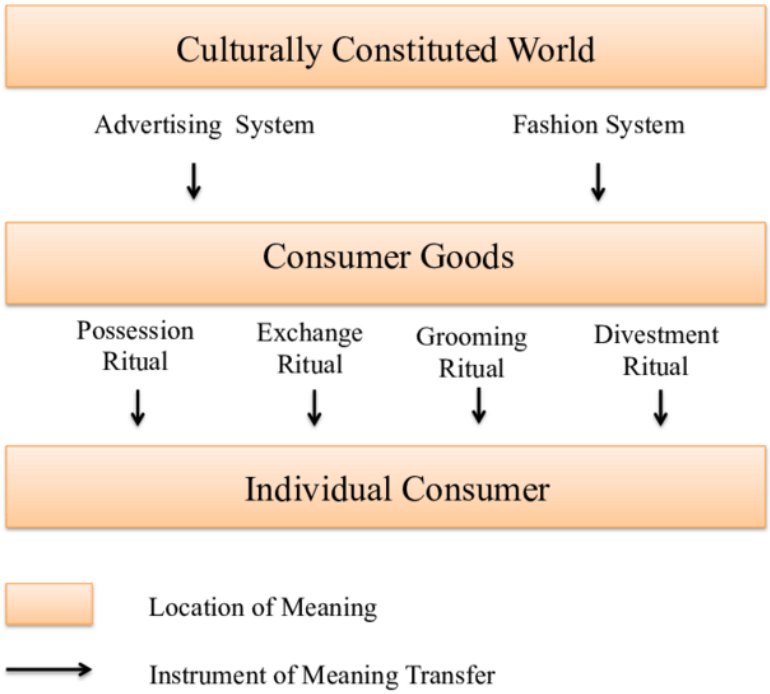
Central to the symbolic meaning of consumption are consumer freedoms. Although the liberatory postmodernism position suggests that consumers are able to construct meanings in any way they desire in contemporary society (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, p. 260), research has shown that the meanings of various products or brands are primarily used to present who the owners are; i.e. the self-identities (Thompson & Haytko 1997, pp. 35-36). This notion of choice lies at the very centre of the emancipatory potential of the consumer identity project in contemporary society (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). Choosing from marketplace offerings, consumer identity projects generate dialectical tensions between the agency of individual consumers (Holt, 1995, 1997), questioning how much choice consumers really have.

Indeed, consumption is a major source of symbolic meaning with which individuals employ and nurture their project of the self (Belk 1988; Goffman, 1978). This means that in their everyday life, individuals employ consumption symbolism in order to create and communicate their self-concepts, in addition to identifying their associations with others (Dittmar, 1992; Elliott, 1999; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Nevertheless, consumption symbolism is not a constant or intrinsic element; *"rather it is socially constructed and there is no essential external reference point"* (Elliott, 1999 p. 286). McCracken (1986 p. 71) notes that consumption symbolism is always

in transit, constantly flowing to and from many sources in society, helped by the collective and individual efforts of producers and consumers. Particularly in the contemporary realm, the more society is saturated with signs and images, which marketers create in their marketing campaigns in order to induce consumers, the more those signs and images are disconnected and removed from what they refer to (i.e. products), consumption symbolism thus becomes more malleable and diverse (Brown, 1995; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) enhancing the liberatory potential for the consumer identity project. Consequently, it has become important for companies to understand how consumers value their set of life projects and how they enact their life narratives (Mick & Buhl, 1992); also, many marketing studies have revealed how collective consumers co-create the symbolic meaning of consumption (Arnould & Price, 2000; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Wright, Cova & Pace, 2006). Ultimately, consumption symbolism becomes negotiable and is subject to endless interpretations (Baudrillard, 1998; Elliott, 1999). But at some point, consensus must be reached in a social context, however the reason for consumption could be different for example, as Temple (2006), notes, Rolex is expensive, does Rolex make high-quality watches? Probably, does it matter? Probably not, as people would buy them anyway, this argument exists, because of the strength of the brand. Hence, consumers actively look for symbolic resources in order to help negotiate, interpret and appropriate meaningfulness in everyday consumption practices (Warde, 2016; Wattanasuwan, 2005) and this liberatory view of consumption is adopted throughout this thesis. This view is useful because brands must have a defined meaning to communicate, therefore understanding how this influences brand meaning co-creation in the English university environment is of value to this thesis.

An important part of this defined meaning, which brands in postmodern society must understand to communicate effectively, is that meaning is not delivered in the communication process, rather it is constructed within it (Anderson & Meyer, 1988) and according to McCracken (1986) this meaning is located in three places. This includes the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer and it has been suggested that meaning moves in a trajectory at two points of transfer: world to good and good to individual (see Figure 5, McCracken's (1986) transfer of meaning model). McCracken (1990, p. 12) asserts, *"without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible"*, suggesting the very nature of cultural meaning predicates a shared interpretation of particular phenomena (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978). What this model also depicts is that meaning is something that can be extrapolated objectively from symbols as long as individuals are in possession of the underlying cultural codes shared by society (Holt, 1997). Therefore, according to the model, the meaning encoded into their brand by HE providers is subject to change during the communication process through acts of self and collective definition, rather than delivered by the brand, when the student consumer as viewer-reader successfully decodes these meanings and the process of world-good transfer is complete (Batey, 2008).

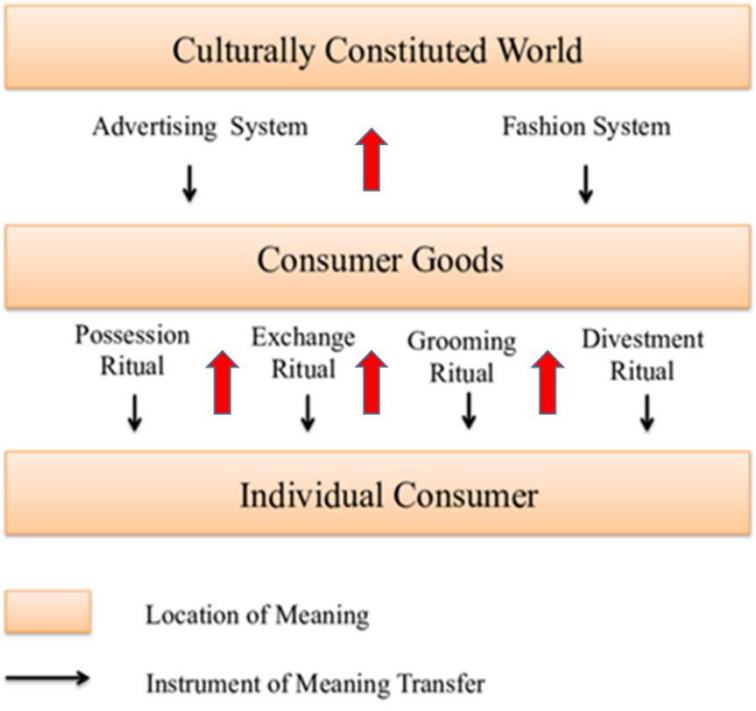
Figure 5. McCracken's (1986) Transfer of meaning model of symbolic consumption.



Within consumer research, McCracken's model has been widely accepted as the model of meaning flow. This is because the model demonstrates utilising meaning in interpreting reality as an ongoing process and describes this as a cultural project to make sense of everyday life (McCracken, 1986). While this model is an oversimplification of the vast and continual movement of meaning, at the time, the model represented the most evolved attempt to unite meaning and interpretation movement. Nevertheless, the value of evaluating the model in discussions for the current thesis is understanding the limitations of the model in order to develop a co-creative framework and build the thesis conceptual story. It is useful to remember that individuals are not just passive receivers of meaning but actively participate in its creation (Batey, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004a). The model illustrates, meaning

transfer does not account for the dynamic changes that stem from interaction between individuals, networks and the brand and therefore is limited to explaining brand-consumer junctures (Ringberg, 1999; Scott, 1994). Instead, what needs to be considered in contemporary society is that meaning is not confined to a single semiotic system, but exists in multiple, fragmented and overlapping ways, therefore, consumers actively engage in the co-creation of meaning and hence the flow of this meaning is not one way. The model demonstrates the link between modern and postmodern, suggesting that co-creation is the meeting point. As such, McCracken's (1986) model has been adapted to reflect this and include the active role of the individual consumer in the location of meaning (see Figure 6). What this adapted model now allows for are the co-creative inputs of individual consumers that play a central role in constructing brand meaning in the postmodern environment.

Figure 6. Adapted transfer of meaning model of symbolic consumption.



However, even this adapted model cannot capture the complexities involved in co-creating brand meaning. That is, both the models bring the focus back to the consumer and brand intersection, what this presumes is that co-creation is limited to engagement with the brand and the individual consumers, neglecting the role of networked associations in the co-creation of brand meaning, that goes beyond the brand-consumer intersection. These meanings which are co-created in the networks of association maybe highly idiosyncratic and at times they are absorbed, if not into the mainstream then at least into consumer groups (Batey, 2008). This is where exploring consumptions groups, identity and the customer journey become significant to co-creating brand meaning in postmodern society.

2.3.5 Brand Meaning in Postmodern Society

By explaining how consumers create symbolic meaning and value through consumption, Fırat and Dholakia (2006), conclude that attention has moved beyond a simple market orientation emphasis on consumers over products. Lawrence and Phillips (2002) believe that value represents not only the functional and economic value of goods and services, but also the consumer's interpretation of the objects, including products, brands, and services; in this way, value co-creation has shifted beyond the consumer's purchasing power and the functional purposes of products to focus on the meaning of consumption. Thus, consumers do not consume so much for the functional aspect of a product, *"rather, they rely on the symbolic meanings; that is, the meanings underlying the product or the brand"* (Elliott, 1999 p. 286) which results in symbolic consumption. Central to this discussion from commodity to concept lies the brand's power to persuade people to buy products *"whether they are needed or not"* (Danesi, 2006, p. 17) through signs, and Danesi holds that the

consumer is buying the idea of this sign, rather than the product itself. From a semiotic perspective, it is in this lexicon of signs that the meaning is created; the signs do not operate autonomously, they only gain value through their association with each other, and subsequently through the associations they evoke in the minds of the consumers (Mick, 1986). According to Saussure (1916; 1983), meaning is defined by the relationship between a sign and other signs in the same system. The distinction between one sign and other signs in the same system affords the sign value, and it is this value that largely determines meaning. Therefore, as Danesi says *"The brands retell the stories to us, and we call them reality"* (2006, p. 113). A key point from this semiotic approach is that the meaning of a brand is not determined by any one party, but is rather a construct of the context in which it exists. It is therefore common among researchers to designate brands as important carriers of symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959). Holt (2004) states that consumers purchase some brands for what they symbolise, as much, or more, as for what they actually offer functionally. This makes an important point with regard to Gardner and Levy's (1955) article and the understanding of branded goods as public objects. Revisiting their article and relating the central debates to postmodern times reveals it is not only the brand owner's intended meaning that is important to consumers but also the meanings that people in general have assigned to the brand over time. This has important implications for brand meaning and the university environment, because every university has to have meaning e.g. a public object with agreed meaning such as Oxford University and without something to make meaning from, there is no meaning (Fish, 1980), therefore, this ongoing negotiation process between brand producers and brand users is a key to understanding how brands become meaningful (Thellefson & Sorensen, 2013).

2.3.6 The Negotiated View of Brand Meaning

Brands are more complex entities in contemporary society. The branded product does not only fulfil the customer's rational need, but also offers specific benefits that will satisfy emotional desires (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). These conditions also emphasise the need for consumer researchers to go beyond the study of individual consumers to consider consumers operating in cultures and social collectives, embracing complexity, fragmentation, plurality and the heterogeneous distribution of meaning in the market place (Allen et al., 2008). This is because brands are socially constructed texts which mediate meanings between and amongst consumers and producers; a brand is a 'sign for sale' (Levy, 1959). Numerous theories and studies (see Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Fish, 1980; Fiske, 1990; O'Donohoe, 2001; Ritson & Elliott, 1999) state that in contemporary consumer society meaning making is an individual process; they also note that reading and learning how to interpret/decode are social practices. Scholars of literary criticism have argued the case for the individual in the communicative cycle, far from being passive, the individual actively makes sense of media, by employing their individual interpretative lenses (Fiske, 2010; Radway, 1984). Therefore, meaning negotiation is dependent on the subjective states of the receivers; their individual goals, life projects and how their own cultural resources affect the process considerably (Holt, 1995), meanings are thus culturally constructed.

On the one hand, individuals interact with each other and engage in a collective; on the other hand, they externalise and objectify their negotiated meaning over time and these collective interactions establish a shared consciousness, marked by rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In the postmodern environment, this has resulted in exploring the nature of relationships

between the consumer and the brand, as typologies of consumption communities have emerged as a vital aspect of the consumer cultural landscape (Canniford, 2011).

2.3.6.1 Consumption Communities

Central to the consumption community concept is a focus on social interaction, identity and meaning in consumer groups. These groups are shaped by certain membership criteria such as boundaries with outsiders, group composition, group values and identity, intra-group hierarchies and the tension this creates between group and individual identities (O'Reilly, 2012). In particular, three of the most common community concepts are described as sub-cultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes. Early consumption community work describes subcultures as a dedicated kind of community that focuses on resistance and marginalisation as a form of shared social activity, brands that facilitate this communal goal become central to subculture activity (Canniford, 2011; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Willis 1977). In an attempt to theorise newly emerging forms of consumption in the postmodern environment, studies of consumer-consumer relationships, brand-consumer relationships and their influence on individual consumption have typically focused on brand communities (Balmer, 2006; Canniford, 2011; Kozinets, 2001; Luedicke, 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Wright et al., 2006). Muniz & O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) posited that *"brand communities have an active interpretive function, with brand meaning being socially negotiated, rather than delivered unaltered, from context to context, consumer to consumer"*. This notion of brand communities expands the emphasis on social relationships in the consumer behaviour research area and focuses on the dynamics of a group/s of consumers centring on one brand for marketing opportunities. In particular, studies of brand communities suggest that the shared use

of products and services structures interpersonal connections amongst likeminded individuals, as well as distinction from non-users of focal brands (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Thus, the brand is central to the community members who seek like-minded individuals. A learning process takes place leading to an understanding of the meaning of the brand within these social structures.

Consumption community debate has evolved, the value of brand communities has been re-appraised by marketing scholars as research has found that many consumers do not locate their socialisation around singular brands or solitary activities (Canniford, 2011; Canniford & Shankar, 2011; Cova and Cova 2001). Postmodern consumers' interest has shifted to lifestyle activity rather than a brand, thus individuals are more interested in the social links to the brand (Fournier & Lee, 2009). As such, the role of the brand has become less central to the consumption community and therefore, a more valuable way to describe consumption activities is through the concept of consumer tribes (Canniford, 2011). Consumer tribes exist when members identify with one another, have shared experiences, and engage in collective social action all of which can be facilitated through a variety of brands products, activities and services (Canniford & Shankar, 2011; Cova & Cova, 2001). In this sense, one individual consumer who has different identity projects may be involved in several different brand tribes at the same time. Furthermore, Maffesoli (1995) establishes that consumer social identities and consumption choices shift depending on situational and lifestyle factors, therefore, tribal membership is fluid and can fluctuate according to the involvement of the individual. Therefore, an individual may belong to multiple tribes at the same time to express different aspects of their identity (Mitchell & Imrie, 2011). However, this shift in postmodern consumer behaviour and consumption

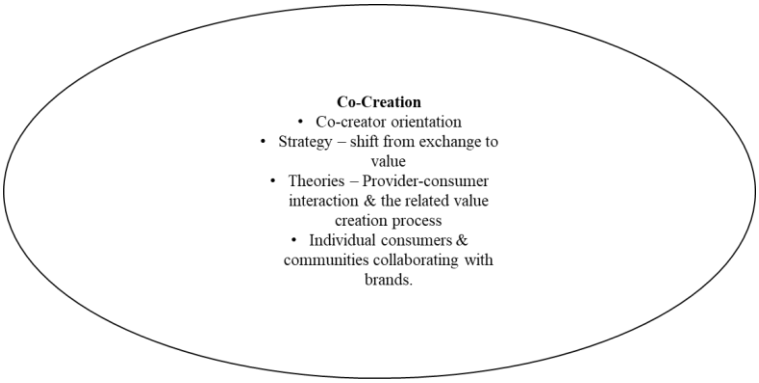
communities brings about challenges for the contemporary brand. That is, tribes are multiple, complex and emergent, this makes them difficult to manage (Goulding et al., 2013). A brand community, which represents a cohesive and shared consumption of brands, would be easier to manage (Fournier & Lee, 2009; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). But, brand tribes offers a vital alternative and presents an opportunity to communicate with elusive postmodern consumers who hold meaning and significance for the individuals within them (Cova, 1997). In the fragmented postmodern society, tribes offer a valuable way to theorise consumers' responses to desires for constant change (Canniford, 2011). The tribes formed by these individuals do not display the predictability and stability of traditional segments. Instead, consumer tribes are characterised by their dynamic nature, heterogeneous membership, shared values, and willingness to create their own meanings (Canniford, 2011). Consumer tribes cannot be defined and targeted by marketers in the way that traditional segments or brand communities can be, they only exist symbolically through their members creating a social link and building bridges between individuals (Cova, 1996; Cova & Salle, 2008; Simmons, 2008). These bridges can (but it is not always the focus) be used to connect individuals with the brand because any symbolic meaning, when it is successfully conferred to consumers, is the brand bridge. Therefore, the social links established between consumers or consumers-to-consumer linking value are more important than whatever is being consumed (Cova, 1996). This is a valuable idea in the English HE environment where student consumers are brought together not in a 'traditional brand community' sense, and therefore the concept of consumer tribes with its focus on linking value offers a means to explore the HE consumption communities that are not neatly captured by traditional subcultural or brand community categories (Canniford, 2011).

In support of consumer tribes being a more suitable concept to describe postmodern student consumers, tribes develop through individual consumers who begin to interact because they have something in common, in the HE environment this could be students' programme of study, where they live or social activities. Moreover, tribal consumption revolves around the interactive social processes in the relationship between brands and consumers, as well as among consumers, therefore prioritising this social link is an important characteristic in marketplace cultures. However, what is most important for the current thesis is how this influences brand meaning in the HE environment. In the pursuit of brand meaning, it has been shown that consumer tribes empower customers to actively participate in the value co-creation process (Lee & Kim, 2018). Therefore, the consequence of this for the unbounded postmodern consumer (O'Donohoe, 2001) and education brands is that they can choose how to interpret consumer goods, and marketing, to co-create their own meanings (Holt, 1997, 2002; Kates, 2001, 2002b). The only thing that bounds the postmodern consumers' meaning-making and identity construction is their desire to fit into a social group (Hebdige, 1979; Jameson, 1998; Kates, 2002b; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Muggleton, 2000; Thornton, 1995). Therefore, in addition to the brand community, consumer tribes offer the current thesis a way to explore the complex levels of identity construction and the intermediating role of consumer groups that shapes student consumers' brand meaning co-creation. Moreover, Canniford (2011), suggests that membership of a tribe does not preclude membership from other communities, allowing exploration to focus on the flows of multiplicity of membership (and thus, flow of brand meaning) of the student consumers.

2.4 Co-creating Brand Value in Contemporary Consumer Society

2.4.1 The Theory of Value Co-Creation

Figure 7. Theoretical contribution of study; co-creation in the HE environment.



In response to debates concerning who controls brand meaning, recent developments in commercial marketing thought (e.g. the last 15-20 years) have introduced the concept of value co-creation (see Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). This has resulted in a paradigm shift of marketing focus. Although the 4Ps framework made allowance for a customer orientation, marketing tasks remained largely involved with the production, distribution, and exchange of tangible goods which satisfy the needs or wants of customers (Kotler, 2003). Changes in consumer society have resulted in fragmented views, these views are mostly concerned with companies' competitive advantages in a dynamic, fragmented and hyperreal marketing environment (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a). Because of this, the impact of the cultural and social schemas on the behaviour of consumers (Arnould, 2006; Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2007; Firat et al., 1995) became the focus in postmodern marketing. Thus, at the extreme end of modern marketing was a mode of thought which was characterised by logic, rationality, utility and complete control of marketing messages assigned to the marketer, brand or organisations. Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum is the belief that under postmodern conditions the focus of any marketing activity should

revolve completely around the meanings consumers construct about brands, as consumers possess the power. A detailed review of both these paradigms (see Section 2.2 and Section 2.3) has revealed that in reality, there is evidence that both of these positions contribute to meaning (Batey, 2008; 2015). From the traditional marketing perspective there must be a message communicated in order for some sort of interpretation to take place on behalf of the consumer, but consumers are now considered an active part of that interpretation process, as such brands can no longer assume complete control. Consequently, there has been a power shift in the brand-consumer relationship; this represents a change from a producer-consumer perspective to a co-creation perspective (Wikström, 1996). Therefore, in order to explore brand meaning in the contemporary HE environment, a paradigm (see Figure 7), which considers the contribution of both these approaches (modern and postmodern) but in particular a co-creative orientation of individuals and communities in creating value, will facilitate exploration.

2.4.1.1 How Does Value Emerge?

The value co-creation concept illustrates the power relations shift between brands and their consumers. Etgar (2006) supports the notion that value materialises through consumption and that consumers are able to perceive value when they consume and experience goods or services. He argues (Etgar, 2006, p. 128), *"production and consumption are not two separate activities but one continuous whole, and consumers are not recipients of a completed output but are involved in the whole value creation process"*. The value co-creation process involves both the consumer and the organisation and according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000), consumers and organisations now collaborate beyond the price system that traditionally mediated supply-demand relationships. Therefore, consumers and brands interact, develop

relationships and co-create brand meaning. Some scholars refer to this relationship as *"working consumers"* (Cova & Dalli, 2009, p. 317) others (Kozinets et al., 2004, p. 671) have suggested *"consumers as producers"* is a more appropriate term. The role of the consumer has been discussed from many perspectives, but in respect to creating value the consumer has been described as either working consumers, co-production, *"prosumption"*, consumer empowerment, consumer agency, consumer tribes, and so forth (Cova & Dalli, 2009, pp. 317-323). Consequently, consumers are indeed no longer at the end of the consumption chain (Firat & Dholakia, 1998) they are part of the meaning production, this means that brands cannot create value wholly by themselves, thus brands act as facilitators for the consumers who co-create the value of their products and services.

2.4.1.2 The Exchange Process

The value creation process, as viewed through a cultural contemporary society lens, illustrates how brands can go about co-creating value with consumers by accounting for the experience and meaning in the cultural life-worlds of consumers (Arnould, 2006; Pongsakornrungslip & Schroeder, 2011). This emergent concept of value has blurred the boundaries between production and consumption (Arvidsson, 2005, 2013). The relationship shift requires both cooperation and balanced participation between brands and consumers in order to create value, since brands can no longer create value entirely on their own and neither can the consumer. Connected to this is the idea that consumers may use their consumption activities to modify their identity (Holt, 1995; Solomon, 2010) in contemporary consumer society, but consumers cannot co-create this by themselves because they need to use marketplace stimuli (e.g. brand, product, services, advertising etc.) as mediators to co-create this value. Furthermore,

universities are services, therefore, interactions, dialogues and levels of involvement between the consumer and the brand are central to the value exchange process.

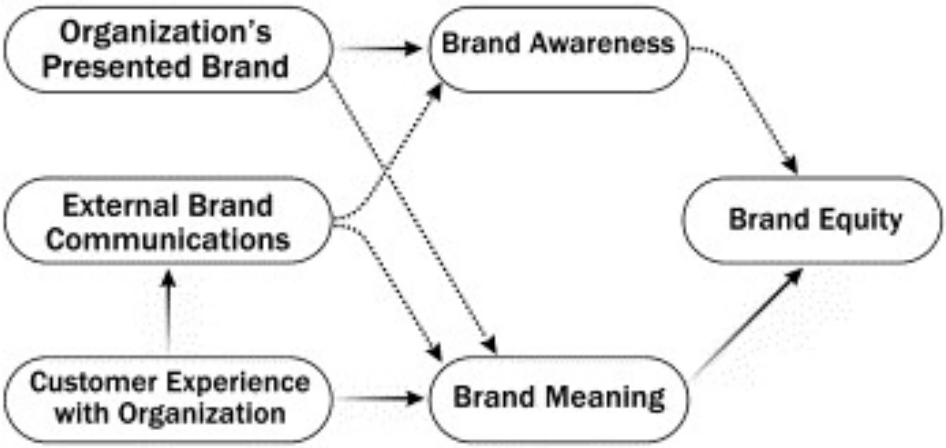
2.4.1.3 Meaning Co-creation and Service Brands

Co-creation is inherent in service brands in which market offerings are actually created during the service encounter (Etgar, 2008; Solomon, 1985; Vargo & Lusch, 2004b). The period between 1970 and 1990, came to symbolise a stronger service sector, the brands of that time were developed to become 'story-telling brands' with the aim to create a meaning for their consumers (Roper & Parker, 2006, p. 58). This represents a radical departure from a goods-dominant logic, which confines the understanding of value creation to the brand's production and operational activities and conceptualizes value based on the output of the firm (see e.g. Porter, 1985). It is widely accepted that service brands are different from product brands in a number of respects (Chapleo 2008; De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley 1998; Gronroos, 1998; Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1985). In an attempt to understand the extent to which the conceptualisation of 'the brand' developed in relation to physical goods, and its relevance to services, De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) discussed the unique features of services, which have been identified throughout the branding literature (Bateson, 1977, 1979; Bateson & Hoffman, 1995; Berry, 1980; Gronroos, 1991; Zeithaml et al., 1985). These features include the intangibility of services, the inseparability of production and consumption, heterogeneity and perishability. Central to service brands is the intangible nature of the offer in which the value of the brand is harder to communicate compared to products, it is also harder for customers to evaluate prior to purchase and consequently differentiate between competitors (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). Thus, it has been argued that branding of services is even more important than branding of products since the customer has no tangible

attributes when assessing the brand (De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003). In addition to this, services cannot be stored (Bateson & Hoffman, 1995), therefore, service brands face the challenge of developing an image and reputation to attract consumers before the service brand has been experienced (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Consequently, as universities are service brands, this challenge contributes to the difficulties student consumers face in evaluating a university prior to experiencing the brand.

A significant issue with this is understanding how consumers create brand meaning/value before they have actually experienced the service brand. It is generally accepted in the product branding literature that meaning/value is created prior to purchase; according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy, (2000, 2004a) and Vargo and Lusch (2004a), value is usually determined before a market exchange can take place. However, as Vargo and Lusch (2004b, 2008) present, in services the consumers are integrated in the production process where the service provider and consumer mutually co-create the value. This is because services are dominated by experience qualities, which highlights some key challenges for the marketing and branding of services prior to purchase (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Subsequently, meaning is foremost affected by the customer's experiences with the brand. This is illustrated in Berry's (2000) service-branding model (see Figure 8) where Berry demonstrates that brand meaning has a greater influence on the brand than brand awareness and is indirectly affected by external brand communication and the presented brand.

Figure 8. Berry's (2000) Service Branding Model



Furthermore, Berry (2000) claims that the presented brand and the external brand communication have a greater impact on new customers, since these are the only features that are communicated to the customer signalling what the brand represents. A valuable point for HE branding, as the majority of student consumers are purchasing a degree for the first time (in fact the only time for most) and therefore have no prior experience of the HE marketplace let alone the university brand. Relatedly, the lived and mediated experiences that influence customers brand meaning emerge important here. That is, according to Berry (2000), when the customer has experienced the service (i.e. their lived experience with the brand) this experience becomes disproportionately influential and results in a greater impact than any mediated experience they have stored. For example, if the mediated forms of advertising the HE brand communicates with the student consumers differs to their lived experience of the university brand, they will believe the lived experience over the advertising communication (Berry, 2000). This might be as a consequence of the mediated

experiences being spatially and temporarily distant from the practical context of everyday life, illustrating the importance of contextualised experiences in shaping interpretation and customer brand meaning making. Berry (2000) also highlights the importance of external brand communication, which can influence both the awareness and meaning of the brand. Importantly, brand awareness may not be derived solely from the presented brand, but also from communications about the brand acquired from independent sources. Grönroos (2004) expands on this by explaining that to a potential customer, an individual who has experienced the service is considered as a more objective source of information and therefore if there is dissonance between a mediated source and word of mouth (WOM) communication, the mediated source will lose. Essentially, Berry's (2000) model introduces social influences as part of the brand meaning making framework. He suggests that consumers may be aware of a brand (brand awareness) through the brand's marketing, but it is only through their own experience of the brand or influences external to the brand that they begin to assign brand meaning.

Central to generating meaning from consumers own experiences with a brand is the role of customer engagement. Scholars in the area of services marketing suggest that the function of customer engagement (CE) in co-creating experience, value and meaning is significant (Brodie, Hollebeek, Biljana Juric & Ilic 2011; Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek's, 2013). This is because customer engagement with a brand extends beyond mere involvement, it encompasses an interactive relationship emerging from specific brand interactions (Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, & Verhoef, 2010). According to Brodie et al's. (2013), extensive review of CE literature, they define customer engagement as a multidimensional, context-dependent state, which involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and brands,

this fluctuates in intensity levels that occur within dynamic, iterative engagement processes. Brodie et al (2011) established important criteria for customer engagement in their influential commentary, this includes the notion of interactivity between focal engagement subject(s) and object(s) and this runs as a common thread through most engagement conceptualisations (Jaakkola & Alexander 2014). In particular, for services this occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal object (e.g., a brand) to enhance the service relationship. Indeed, Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen (2019) argue that customer engagement should not be confused with brand experience. This is because brand experience does not presume a motivational state and therefore it is proposed that focus should centre on the interactive nature of CE (vs. interactive experience) to more clearly differentiate these concepts (Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2019). Further important criteria to consider from Brodie et al's (2011) work includes the context dependent nature of CE, which also incorporates a social CE dimension (Vivek, Beatty, Dalela & Morgan, 2014) and therefore more fully reflects CE in a networked or institutional settings (Vargo & Lusch 2016). In the HE environment, this becomes a crucial direction for exploration, as it has been well documented (Hemsley-Brown et al. 2016; Jevons, 2006; Maringe, 2005) that due to its unique nature, HE provides a distinctive context which includes varied actors that interact, co-exist and co-create value. Therefore, owing to these complexities, much needs to be learned about the relationship between customer engagement, the brand and thus brand meaning in this context.

Maslowska, Malthouse and Collinger (2016) advance the understanding of the concept of customer engagement, which comprises customer– brand dialogue behaviours, customer consumption behaviours, and customer experience of a brand's actions. They suggest that customer engagement is not only an intended customer reaction

brought about by marketing activities, but also the interconnection of the entire customer ecosystem, including the brand and other customers' interactivity. What this suggests is that relationships are not just between consumers and producers, but between any combination of (and among) potential and existing customers, non-customers, society in general, their extended relationships, and brands. It is through such engagement that relationships between individuals and brands are formed, in turn this provides consumers with motivation to engage with co-creative processes. One of the key drivers of understanding antecedents of CE with a brand is to understand a customer's motivation for engagement in co-creation as a way of exploring customer logic that can shed light on evaluating why and how customers contribute in this process (Cheung, Lee & Jin, 2011; Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015). In particular, Brodie et al. (2013) have highlighted the iterative nature of the consumer engagement process. Furthermore, specific relational consequences of engagement may act as antecedents in subsequent engagement, processes and/or cycles (Hollebeek, 2011). The significance of this point for the current study is that consumer engagement embodies specific interactive consumer experiences that influence future co-creation activity, therefore customer engagement as a process evolves and intensifies over time (Bowden, 2009a; Gambetti et al., 2012). In a complex environment such as HE, this directs attention towards brand meaning developing as a co-creation across a journey during these engagement experiences, rather than a fully formed complete meaning prior to purchase.

Clearly, there is evidence to suggest that prior to purchase constructions of brand meaning are important, however, the extant literature in services highlights difficulties associated with evaluating quality prior to purchase (Berry, 2000; De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). Additionally, more recent studies (Brodie et al, 2011, 2013;

Hollebeek et al, 2019) suggest the interactive experiences between a consumer and a brand fluctuates in intensity levels, this occurs within dynamic, iterative engagement processes across a journey, central to this is the notion of interactivity between focal engagement subject(s) and object(s). This illustrates an area that requires further exploration, specifically for more complex, context dependent services brands such as HE. Exploring the role of subjective/objective meanings and the iterative engagement processes across a journey is significant for understanding how brand meaning is co-created in the HE environment.

2.4.2 The Consumer Journey and the Influence of Subjective/Objective Meanings

It is well established that to create value, the consumer must be able to derive meanings from brands, these meanings emerge from both language and interactions (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006) and the interplay of both shared and individual meanings is essential to brand building. Relatedly, this emerges on a journey through individual interactions with the brand prior to purchase evolving with shared meanings at a collective level (e.g. social media brand communities) and then face to face interactions upon arrival gaining direct experience with the brand (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006). As such, it is in the production and reproduction of socio-cultural interactions that value and meaning are co-created (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri, & Pich, 2016; Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Edvardsson et al., 2014). Central to co-creation is a culturally shared meaning, which is adapted by individuals according to their own unique circumstances, this takes place via consumption experiences across the consumer journey. The consumer journey considers an individual's actual interaction rather than merely what the brand has dictated for the journey, this develops over time, through a series of events and

exchanges which construct meaning *"prior to, during and after the actual exchange and use(s) takes place"* (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006, p. 300). Furthermore, as the consumer locates brand meaning during these experiences, they consult their cultural stores to make sense of the multiple interpretations on offer to them according to their own contexts (Scott, 1994) contradicting the service user experiences, further highlighting the challenges for meaning prior to usage. Therefore, central to the value co-creation process is the use of signifiers for brand meaning appropriation (Holt, 2004) and understanding consumer's appropriation efforts in producing value and meaning relating to brands is clearly desirable for organisations/firms. However, this meaning appropriation is considered at different levels (Batey, 2008) and tends to be multi-layered and multidimensional. Part of these layered approaches focuses on the subject–object relation between marketers and consumers in the study of markets and meaning. Therefore, these levels of meaning draw attention to relations of power between consumers and marketers, as well as between consumer groups and brands (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006). This is an important consideration for services because the level of involvement the consumer engages with influences their constructions of awareness and meaning prior to purchase. Existing literature describes this awareness as a component of the brand which adds value, and according to Riezebos and Riezebos (2003) different levels of awareness range from unaware, passive awareness, active awareness to top-of-the-mind awareness. In addition to levels of brand awareness, is the intangible nature of the service brand in which the value of the brand is harder to communicate and more difficult for customers to evaluate, compared to products (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). This suggests that the perceived risk is generally higher and there is a need for an extended information search resulting in higher levels of customer involvement in service brands. Moreover, as Vargo and

Lusch (2008) present, service brand customers are integrated in the production process where the service provider and customer mutually co-create the value, suggesting that customers' involvement is a prerequisite for the value of the service, as well as brand meaning co-creation. As customer involvement has a clear moderating influence on the relation between individuals' perception of brand attributes and brand value (Ahlert, Olbrich, Kenning, Schroeder, Swoboda, Haelsig, & Morschett, 2009), this has implications for brand meaning making. More specifically, as a result of this involvement the social meanings and cultural meanings, which are derived from subjective meanings ascribed to an object (or brand) by others in society (Batey, 2008) begin to shape brand meaning for the individual in services.

Central to this discussion is Simmel's (1903; 1971) seminal analysis of the widening gap, characteristic of modernity, between the objective culture and the increasingly alienated individual who is continually frustrated in his or her pursuit for genuine individuality (Miles, 1996; 1999). While Simmel is aware of the possible negative effects of objective culture, he considers it possible for individual dispositions to develop within these conditions (Farganis, 1993). To put it in the postmodern sense, individuals are permitted to conceive the appropriation of self which can obtain pleasure from the multiple forms of self-expression in different contexts, as Gergen (1991, p. 150) claims: *"to survive, the postmodern self may need to become a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation"*. Relatedly, Prus (1997) suggests that such a culture should be understood as a multiplicity of life worlds and identity projects, that is, a collective of individuals that have chosen shared ideologies and life projects that comprise of a subcultural mosaic. Furthermore, according to Ritzer (2014), humans are conscious and creative

individuals and the mind plays a central role in this joint orientation and social interaction. This creativity allows for flexibility and autonomy on the part of the individual, yet at the same time, it helps to establish the structures of objective culture that may constrain and suppress this freedom (Ritzer, 2014). That is, social interaction becomes standardised and has patterns to it, and these become forms of association. This all points towards the idea that brands subsume meaning at different levels (Batey, 2008). Objective shared meaning rests at the core created through cultural and marketing systems, the level above is culturally created by subjective meaning derived from thoughts and beliefs shared by members of a particular culture, above this are the more subculture-specific thoughts and images associated with an object, reflected in the meanings produced by brand communities for example. The final level of meaning is distinctive to an individual and is formed as a result of personal subjective experiences (Batey, 2008; Verma, 2013); these experiences are multiple and temporal, society is thus a co-creation of individuals as they are able to move further away from the objective level meanings imposed by society through continuous interactions with diverse social groups (Simmel, 1971).

Significant to this discussion are Simmel's (1903; 1971) ideas on cultural activity and the bombardment of signs, Simmel locates concepts of cultural activity in the material responses of individuals to the frenzied distractions of the city. A key aspect of Simmel's work is his explanation of the individual's response to the variety of stimuli, which assault the senses in the city. Such statements are echoed in the work of many postmodern writers; in postmodern times social life is dominated by the dramatic proliferation of simulations, whereby media, information technology bombards consumer society with countless signs, messages and images, the distinction between the image and reality is effaced (Baudrillard 1983; Jameson 1984 cited 1991).

According to Brown (1995), in consumer society, hyperreality is evident across the entire marketing spectrum, consumers are exposed to endless signs and simulations, especially from advertising and retailing milieus. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) observe that when marketing signs and simulations capture imagination, individuals tend to accept the authenticity of those simulations. Because of this, individuals consume signs that do not deplete in the way things do, the meanings of signs are subject to an endless re-appropriation and re-contextualisation of previous signs (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) adding to the multidimensional levels of brand meaning. Likewise, Simmel (cited in Farganis, 1993 p. 142) notes that for the individual this creates the *"difficulty of asserting his own personality within the dimensions of metropolitan life"*. The growth of the city, the increasing number of people in the city, and the *"brevity and scarcity of the inter-human contacts granted to the metropolitan man, as compared to the social intercourse of the small town"* (Farganis, 1993 p. 143) makes the "objective spirit" dominate the "subjective spirit". According to Simmel (1971), the typical reaction of subjectivity to the crisis of metropolitan life is defensive and protective, that is, to withdraw into a blasé attitude and to withhold commitment to objective forms. Simmel (1971, p. 329), is directing his attention at this juncture to the numbing of the senses due to over-stimulation; the development of a homogenous gaze, ignorant of the distinctions between things (and therefore also of the things themselves). Therefore, individual liberation is potentially increased greatly, but there are problems of alienation, fragmentation, and identity construction (Goulding, 2003; Wiley, 1994; Yalom, 1980). What is under examination here is the capacity of the individual to produce, absorb, and control the elements of objective culture (Ritzer, 2014). Social interaction, that is looking to the reaction of others, forming impressions of and making inferences about other individuals as well as seeking the recognition

and awareness of others, is an vital characteristic of individual personality (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). Simmel (1971) links the individual and the social when discussing social interaction and asserts both require the existence of the other. Consequently, the individual can, to some extent, be distinctly individual, but only in the sense that everybody else is being an individual in the same ways (Miles, 1999). Central to this is consumer tribes as supplying social links through the shared use of products and services (Canniford, 2011; Cova, 1996, 1997; Maffesoli, 1995). Simmel, therefore demonstrating a pre-emptive understanding of postmodern consume tribes in which existence is a purely symbolic form that illustrates ritually manifested commitment of their members.

Almost a century later, the impact of consumer culture within late capitalism is so profound that Simmel's argument has become imbued with more significance than Simmel could ever have imagined (Miles, 1999). Through the commodification of the search for individual difference, Simmel (1903), in many senses anticipates post-modern marketing theory when he provides a description of the need for businesses to constantly stimulate new desires in consumers via an ongoing *"refinement and enrichment of the needs of the public"* (1971a, p. 336). Simmel's ideas therefore provide a clear setting for the discussion on brand meaning as a socio-cultural form, one which exemplifies the continual struggle between the *"striving for the most individual forms of existence and the predominance of what one can call the objective spirit over the subjective"* (Simmel, (1903; 1971). Far from seeing society as an objective system dominating its members, Simmel sees society as an amalgamation of social interactions (Miles, 1996; 1999); it is those interactions that are central to brand meaning and interpretation. Part of this brand meaning and interpretation includes what Schouten, Martin, & McAlexander, (2012) reveal about in-group and out-group

symbolic consumption. Schouten et al (2012) describe how the members of postmodern groups deliberately adopt interpretive strategies designed to obscure and misperceive outsiders and other members. One way consumer groups do this is to create perceptions of out-group and in-group differentiation through conspicuous consumption (Rinehart, 2000; Veblen, 1899; 1994). This is achieved through a socialisation process, which includes learning the social and cultural norms of a group. Veblen (1994) describes this socialisation progression as the process where the consumer commences a learning scheme, informed by the sociocultural influences that they are exposed to e.g. through social interactions with their consumer groups. One way individuals display this socialisation process is through the conspicuous consumption of apparel, learning what to consume and wear; and how to wear apparel to signify a group identity (Berger & Ward 2010). Simmel (1904; 1957) interprets Veblen's concept in the context of out-group versus in-group differentiation and suggests that the learned symbolic meaning of apparel serves a duality of purpose; it demonstrates conformity to the norms of group identity, it also enables in-group differentiation. These ideas surrounding the conspicuous consumption of apparel are useful for exploring brand meaning in HE, since university apparel has social-symbolic meaning in use, when it enables the student consumer (particularly early on in their journey) to imitate those that they aspire to be (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998; Lee, Miloch, Kraft, & Tatum, 2008) in order to fit in. Furthermore, once this initial desired identity (of imitation and conformity) is achieved, the individual will seek to differentiate themselves from other members of the consumer group, through self-symbolism (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998) highlighting the importance of this process for exploring the student consumer's journey. This duality of conformity and

differentiation using conspicuous consumption of apparel unites and segregates postmodern consumer groups (Simmel, 1957; Veblen, 1994).

Both Simmel and Veblen provide some invaluable insights into the social nature of the individual and the collective constraints that exist in any conceptualisation of individuality. Ideas regarding objective/subjective culture and interaction help to illustrate how consumers employ their resources (e.g. apparel) to co-create meaning. This is particularly useful for mapping service brand meaning where it is harder to evaluate consumption experiences. Rather, consumption becomes the central activity where consumers appropriate various signs and images in the market, especially in the media, and reproduce products' value symbolically (Baudrillard, 1998; Brown, 1995; Elliott, 1994). Therefore, "*the customer is a co-producer of service*" and marketing is a process of doing things in interaction with the customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a, p. 7). These concepts also draw attention to the negotiations that take place in consumer culture between consumption, individuals and society. While modernity represents objectified notions of the consumer and a culture of production where *"the customer is the recipient of goods, marketers do things to customers; they segment them and promote to them"* (Vargo & Lusch, 2004a, p. 7), postmodernity is primarily a culture of consumption where consumers paradoxically become ultimate producers of the products consumed (Featherstone 1991; Firat & Venkatesh 1995). Therefore, consumption becomes the defining feature of consumer culture (Holt, 2002). Moreover, modernism focuses on consumption rationality, but from the postmodern perspective, production and consumption are both an activity of value-creation for a brand (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Vargo & Lusch, 2004a). Thus, production and consumption should not be treated as two separate entities as their boundaries are seemingly fused on a continuum of value-creation processes where consumption plays

an ultimate role in ascribing the product's symbolic value. Consequently, when exploring how consumers create value for a brand across the different stages of the consumer journey, the focus is on the process (brand meaning is a process; a journey) rather than the output. This includes all other activities in the exchange process with 'service' at the centre of the exchange process because participants in the market exchange their services among one another (Vargo & Morgan, 2005).

The changing role of the consumer in the course of creating value and meaning can be described through a process of enculturation. It is important at this stage to clarify terminology use. In order to explore the student consumer journey as a process, both socialisation and enculturation have been used interchangeably to describe different aspects of the student consumer experiences. It is acknowledged that these terms are distinct but have been used in conjunction with each other to facilitate a deeper understanding of the cultural and social aspects that influence the student consumers lived experience with the university brand. That is, socialisation or sociation according to Simmel (1903) is the learning process of how to create and fit into a society, this forms part of agreed social norms and enculturation is the embodiment of what has been learned, an ongoing process specific to certain cultures (see Donnelly and Young's 1988, adapted flow model of enculturation stages, Figure 9). Central to the enculturation process is the individual's identity. Enculturation becomes an active learning process, where the individual attempts to transform their actual-self into their desired-self (Donnelly & Young, 1988; 2001; 1999; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kleine & Kleine, 2000; Kleine, Kleine & Laverie, 2006; De Chernatony, 2010b). Through this process of enculturation, some individuals co-construct brand meaning to enhance or build self or social fit with particular communities (Kates, 2002a & b; Kozinets, 2001; Mick, 1986), and for some this meaning provides personal

significance (Holbrook, 2005). This contextualisation is essential for exploring the culturally determined, consumer-relevant, layered brand meanings. This is because the service literature streams relating to consumer experiences centre on: 1. the context in which experiences arise; and 2. the journey mapping of these consumer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Therefore, this has significance for the current thesis by directing attention to the process of brand meaning making rather than establishing a widely agreed brand meaning.

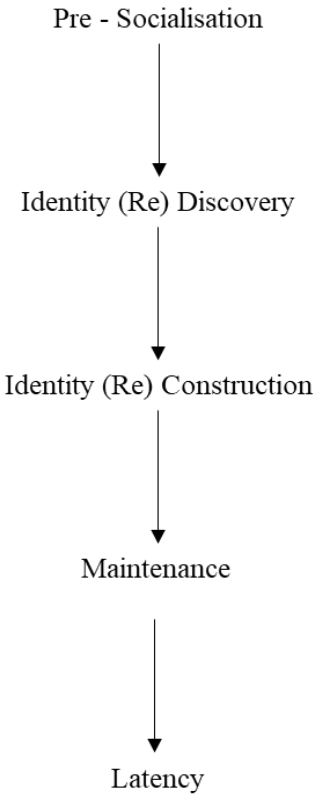
A useful way to map these consumer experiences in the higher education environment is through the consumer's enculturation lifecycle. A detailed explanation of an individual's socialisation from an outsider to an authentic insider has been described in Donnelly and Young's (1988; 2001) seminal study on subcultural identity. Donnelly and Young (1988; 1999; 2001) propose that the enculturation lifecycle has four stages, each of which distances the individual's identity further from their previous outsider status. To explore the enculturation lifecycle Donnelly and Young (1988) focused on sporting subcultures, they propose the first stage of the enculturation lifecycle is pre-socialisation. They found at this stage, an individual's meaning-making and apparel use is informed by stereotypical representations of the subculture, communicated by the media, marketers, and various other outsider sources, in the HE environment this is represented through the various mediated forms of HE marketing. During pre-socialisation, through a process of constant comparison to stereotypical signifiers, the individual begins to employ the limited knowledge that they have acquired to experiment with their identity. They begin to adopt the stereotypical apparel, (e.g. prior to purchase in HE the use of a university hooded jumper) attitudes, jargon, and behaviours that they perceive to be representative of authentic membership of the subculture (Donnelly & Young, 1988; 2001). At this stage of the enculturation

lifecycle, the accuracy of information that the individual is exposed to, consciously or subconsciously, has a significant influence on their future subcultural identity (e.g. attempting to transition into what they think a university student is). This influences whether they progress to the selection/recruitment (Donnelly & Young, 1988; 2001, 1999)/discovery stage (Kleine & Kleine, 2000; Kleine et al., 2006).

Although in their seminal work Donnelly and Young (1988; 2001; 1999) provide (arguably) one of the most detailed explanations of the socialisation process, including the socialisation stage of identity construction, their examples relate to participation in a sports subculture, rather than symbolic consumption in consumer subcultures. However, Donnelly and Young (1988) do discuss at length the use of apparel when individuals experiment with their identity. These ideas can be linked to symbolic consumption, as Kates (2002a) illustrates, consumers compete for an identity through the consumption of apparel; learning what to wear and how to wear it as they undergo enculturation into a cultural group. More specifically, this can be likened to similar attitudes, behaviours and apparel adoption which are representative of the university environment, such as first year undergraduate students using university apparel to activate initial stages of the socialisation process (Lee et al., 2008). Consequently, Donnelly and Young's (1988) model remains relevant, however, more useful for the HE environment in this study is Kleine and Kleine's adaptation of this model (see Figure 9). Instead of adopting terms such as selection/recruitment, their model employs different terminology to explain the stages of the socialisation process. The four stages of Kleine and Kleine's (2000) model include pre-socialisation, identity (re) discovery, identity (re) construction and maintenance, as well as final stage which includes a latency stage that allows more time for development. For example, this will allow for an exploration of the various mediated forms of HE marketing, including

meanings attached to different forms of apparel in the HE environment and how that informs students' insider identity transformation. Attending to these recommendations from the extant literature, this thesis will employ Kleine and Kleine's (2000) adaption of Donnelly and Young's (1988; 2001) enculturation lifecycle in conjunction with the relevant marketing consumer journey literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) to explore student consumer journey mapping in higher education.

Figure 9. Donnelly & Young (1988) and Kleine & Kleine's (2000) enculturation adapted flow model



The importance of adapting Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) ideas on customer journey mapping as well as Figure 9, lies in not only recognising that consumers interpret their brand experiences across a journey with various touchpoints, but in addition to this an understanding of this process and how this enables organisations to comprehend the complete pattern of consumer socialisation/enculturation is undoubtedly desirable for

brands. This is especially significant for service brands such as universities that have multifaceted relationships and messages across different stages between the brand and the consumer. Consumer journey mapping has been typically used *"as a market research tool to help commercial businesses understand consumers' motivations and behaviours"* (Crosier & Handford, 2012, p. 67). Hence, the consumer journey enables brands and organisations to explore the entire, holistic customer journey and the complete pattern of customer behaviour. Much current work in the area of consumer experiences on a journey considers an individual's actual interaction rather than merely what the organisation/brand has dictated for that journey (Norton & Pine, 2013; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). The literature (Curina, Francioni, Hegner, & Cioppi, 2020; Shen, Li, Sun, & Wang, 2018) also emphasises the importance of recognising the value of consumers' cross-channel experiences. Therefore, the stages of a journey not only capture the point of interaction but also the lead-up and post-interaction phases (Segelström & Holmlid, 2011). Consumer journey mapping is a well-established commercial tool used by marketing practitioners and academics, the process supports brands/organisations in understanding the different steps of the journey in context (Alves, Lim, Niforatos, Chen, Karapanos, & Nunes, 2012). Although some of the features may not seem significant in isolation these components can cumulatively contribute towards improving customer experience (Crosier & Handford, 2012) through specific interactional touchpoints, such as social communities with brand employees or other consumers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

A useful way to explore the pre-socialisation processes of the student consumers in the marketised HE sector is to focus on brand touchpoints. According to Davis and Dunn (2002, p. 58), *"brand touchpoints are all the different ways that an organisation's brand interacts with and makes an impression on customers,*

employees, and other stakeholders". In addition to this Khanna et al. (2014) suggest each of these touchpoints falls within the three stages of the consumer experience: (1) pre-purchase, (2) purchase (or usage) and (3) post-purchase. Therefore, a more suitable exploration of the first stage of the enculturation process of HE should focus on the pre-purchase brand experience touchpoints. Although it is useful to consider some of the typical behaviours from the first stage of Donnelly and Young's model (1988), such as the individual beginning to employ the limited knowledge that they have acquired about the brand to experiment with their identity, additional factors must be explored. These influences include specific considerations relating to shaping consumer perceptions and expectations of the brand prior to purchase as well as brand awareness, brand relevant information and prospective student consumers' understanding of the brand's benefits over competing university brands including the value and meaning it brings in fulfilling their personal wants and needs (Khanna et al., 2014). More specifically, how co-created brand meanings through interactions can provide insight into the expectations of the transitioning student consumer (Hardcastle, Cook & Sutherland, 2019). Typically, HE marketing consumer journey studies, whilst focusing on touchpoints, have not directly considered rich insights from consumer culture theory on consumer identity and the influence this has on meaning making. Because of this, the added value of Donnelly and Young's (1988) pre-socialisation stage to the routinely adopted pre-purchase phase contributes towards a better understanding of this stage in the HE environment.

Figure 9 illustrates the next stage of the journey should focus on the discovery stage. This is the stage where the individual evaluates whether the subcultural identity role that they have adopted meets with their expectations. Again, with this stage a large focus in their study is on the sporting apparel the individual uses to socialise. Whilst

there are instances where links can be made to commercial branding, often in the commercial setting the focus will be on points of interaction to increase the chances of purchase. Therefore, when Donnelly and Young (1988; 2001) describe that the individual will also decide whether they want to continue to learn about the subculture at this stage, this can be likened to the purchase stage of the consumer journey when focus moves from considering the brand to actually purchasing. Consequently, the consumer makes an active decision to become more knowledgeable about the brand. If they do, then they begin to make tentative contact with insider members of the subculture (Donnelly & Young, 1988; 2001; 1999; Kleine & Kleine, 2000; Kleine et al., 2006). At the purchase stage, it is hoped that contact with the more knowledgeable members provides the individual with the opportunity to learn and interpret the insider meanings co-created for the brand and therefore inspire confidence that consumers have made the right decision in choosing the brand (Khanna et al., 2014). In the HE environment, this is likely to happen when the student consumer arrives on campus for their first year to commence the student journey. Direct brand experiences through a number of brand and social interactions allow the student consumer to assess whether the knowledge they have gained thus far is relevant for their enculturation lifecycle (Dean et al., 2016). Furthermore, through the process of personal interpretation, analysis, and understanding at this stage, Donnelly and Young (1988; 2001) suggest the individual is continually experimenting with their identity; they use apparel as a symbolic representation of co-created meaning rather than an identity source only. Similarly, in the HE environment, apparel wearing is an essential signifier of identity and group membership. This is because fundamentally at this stage student consumers will imitate more established members to fit in, rather than demonstrating their own subcultural knowledge (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Gabriel & Lang, 2006;

Goffman, 1959; 1990; Ritson & Elliot, 1999; Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009). Consequently, throughout the discovery stage, the individual is constantly deciding whether to progress to the socialisation stage of constructing an appropriate subcultural identity (Donnelly & Young, 1988; 2001; Kleine & Kleine, 2000).

Following the identity construction project the final stage of the adapted flow model (Figure 9) is the maintenance and latency stage of the enculturation lifecycle, insider members of the subcultural environment begin to explicitly inform and influence the individual's identity construction and meaning-making (De Chernatony, 2010b; Donnelly & Young, 1988; 2001; Kleine & Kleine, 2000). The insider members perform the role of gatekeepers (individuals who decide appropriate behaviours and acceptable meanings), ensuring that the individual learns the subjective normative ideals associated with how to interpret the subculture, and its membership signifiers. As Donnelly and Young (1999, p. 68) explain, at this stage the individual "*receives training in both the skills and lifestyle characteristics – the culture – of the activity*". It is during this stage that the individual begins to learn how to read and interpret the authentic subcultural meanings of the apparel which they have been conspicuously consuming in the previous stages.

Central to the focus of this stage in Donnelly and Young's case study is the conspicuous consumption of apparel to gain access to the sporting subculture. When considering brands in the HE sector, focus would shift to where membership is achieved through active consumption, rather than sports participation. The other stages of Donnelly and Young's' model (pre-socialisation and the discovery stage) have been modified to create a more relevant application to the HE environment. But, through evaluation of the extant literature, it is argued that their final stage, the socialisation stage of the enculturation lifecycle provides a more comprehensive explanation of

student consumers' brand experiences in HE than the typical marketing consumer journey touchpoint of post-purchase. This is because typically speaking consumer journey touchpoints for commercial brands at the post-purchase stage cover all aspects of the consumer experience after purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This includes the product itself becoming a critical touchpoint for these experiences, which may lead to consumer loyalty and repeat purchasing in the future for the brand. Both of these aspects are problematic in the HE environment, largely because no one knows what the product is, is it the course, the learning resources, knowledge gained, other activities? And what does consumer loyalty mean in the HE sector? Is it transitioning to postgraduate courses at the same institution, career growth, or alumni involvement (Khanna, et al., 2014)? Therefore, embracing suggestions from Donnelly and Young's model at this stage may reveal some of the richer insights which inform and influence the individual's identity construction and the impact this has on student consumers' co-created brand meaning-making in the HE environment.

Using Kleine and Kleine's (2000) adapted model (see Figure 9) of Donnelly and Young's (1988) stages of enculturation in order to gain a better understanding of the consumer journey has revealed some novel recommendations for exploring the co-creation of brand meaning in HE. In their conclusions, Donnelly and Young (1988; 2001) explain that identity construction within a subculture is a dynamic process, which requires continual active learning, which can be likened to the stages of socialising into a brand when consumers decide that what brand knowledge they have stored is relevant for co-creating meaning. In addition, the construction of an authentic identity relies on co-creating meanings, and consuming apparel, which is perceived to be authentic by other members of the subculture (Kleine & Kleine, 2000), for example in the university environment this could be peer pressure to wear a certain type of

apparel to fit in. The enculturation processes and the stages of the consumer journey literature combined suggest brands in contemporary consumer society have multiple layers of meaning, and individuals construct differentiable identities, within the context of multiple social realities. Most of these meanings emerge through social interactions between brands and consumers and between consumer and consumer, thus, meanings are co-created and occur within a specific sociocultural context. This therefore provides an opportunity for adopting a co-creation theoretical underpinning for exploring brand meaning in HE and this will allow the current thesis to explore how student consumers learn the journey to interpreting the brand.

2.5 What Does this Mean for Higher Education Institutions?

The extant literature discussed so far in Chapter 2 has summarised the advances in marketing and branding, specifically the impact and development of contemporary consumer culture on consumers constructions of brand meanings. This has largely focused on the commercial sector in order to assist with locating the theoretical positioning of the current study and explored whether student consumers engage in similar brand meaning making activities in HE as they would with other brands in their lives. Establishing what this means for HE, an industry that adopts practices that suggests they are behind the commercial marketing and branding sector, will be the focus of this section.

Traditional marketing is about *"the achievement of corporate goals through meeting and exceeding customer needs better than the competition"* (Whitelock & Jobber, 2004, p. 5). There are examples of this traditional perspective in use today by many organisations (Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2013) including those in the HE market. HE marketing is still deeply embedded in the ideals, institutions and vocabulary of modernism, echoing the previous thoughts of Firat and Venkatesh (1995) who suggest

marketing theory continues to be developed in a modernist mode irrespective of contemporary consumer conditions. Furthermore, this type of marketing appears to be based on a 'goods-centred' dominant logic view which has an artificial separation of production and consumption (Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2013; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). From this perspective, consumers are often seen as passive reactors to a variety of marketing activities rather than actively involved in the value creation process. In addition to this problem for HEIs, as the competitive market has developed, with it the need for differentiation has emerged and with that the need for the brand to become more prevalent. It has already been widely documented (Chapleo, 2008; Jevons, 2006; Wæraas, & Solbakk, 2009) that differentiation is a problem for HEIs because it has been highlighted previously in this chapter that universities are unable to differentiate on price, moreover there is clear confusion surrounding what the product is in HE and place, although a significant factor, is largely out of control of the university, leaving one component to manage: promotion. Therefore, modernist modes of thought have been demonstrated as problematic in the contemporary HE environment, this calls for the use of a different paradigm to explore brand meaning in this multifaceted sector.

Higher Education is a complex service; this is due to the type of contact and relationship between the consumer (student) and service provider (higher education brand) in order to co-produce successful outcomes for the service encounter (Khanna, Jacob & Yadav, 2014). The extant literature has revealed that commercially, under the conditions of postmodernity, brand meaning is problematic, it has evolved from being determined and widely communicated by the brand, to being co-created in relationship with specific consumer groups (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Hall, et al., 1997; Holt, 1997; Kates, 2001, 2002a & b; Mick, 1986; Mick & Buhl, 1992). Contemporary consumers

now expect to use brands as cultural resources; therefore, meanings are co-created to fit with their individual lifestyle and identity desires, rather than the brand's preferences (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Hall et al., 1997; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2002). The brand can be part of the co-creation of meaning, but in order to do so they must know what the consumer wants from the product/service, and the type of relationship that the consumer wants to have with the brand (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Rosenbaum-Elliot et al., 2011). However, previous studies have illustrated (Chapleo, 2015) university leaders reporting difficulties in constructing a clear and coherent university brand, the reasons reported for this include commercial models being applied to the university context but needing cultural adjustment. These cultural influences are important for understanding how brand meanings and identity pursuits materialise within the communal contexts. Consequently, this presents an opportunity to understand how contemporary consumers' individual lifestyles and identity desires formed in a cultural context are used to co-create brand meaning in the university environment.

Although the theory of value co-creation has been documented as a well-established paradigm shift in the commercial marketing sector (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a & b: Vargo & Lusch, 2008) co-creation and brand meaning has been largely unexplored in the HE sector. Previous studies in the area of brand meaning in HE have illustrated the role of employees as readers and authors of brand meaning (Dean et al., 2016). A different study (Wilson & Elliot, 2016) revealed that brand meanings for universities are consistent with findings for private sector firms; brand meanings vary across stakeholder groups, yet, these differences were harmonious. Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis (2016) found that students form their perceptions of brand image, identity, and meaning before enrolling at a university.

More recently Robson, Kumar, Roy, Chapleo, and Yang (2019) present a useful discussion on conceptualising brand identity and co-creation as an ecosystem. Furthermore, Hughes & Brooks cited in Nguyen, Melewar, & Hemsley-Brown (Eds.) (2019) suggest HE provides a particularly interesting context for understanding co-creation because of the proactive nature of the role of students in their education and because of the prolonged nature of the interaction between the student and the university brand. Although both these latter mentioned studies provide a valuable direction for co-creation in HE, they were conceptual in nature, as such, there has been limited direct attention focusing on demand side perceptions of brand meaning in English HE.

2.6 Identifying a Knowledge Gap in the Field of Study

Closer inspection of the extant literature acknowledges that consumers have increased their power and choices, and at the heart of the postmodern perspective on branding is the concept of co-creation. According to Holt (2002, p. 72) *"this liberatory view hinges upon the notion that the increasingly diverse and producerly forms of consumption in postmodernity threaten the marketer's dominance"*. Therefore, the way consumers relate to and interact with a brand both determines and is determined by what that brand means to its consumers (Batey, 2015). It is an ongoing, dynamic and multifaceted experience. Brand meaning within a social environment is not only developed and transferred (McCraken, 1986) but also negotiated and altered (Broderick, MacLaran, & Ma, 2003).

According to Chang (1998) due to the fragmentation of society, brands take on new values in consumers' lives and become more important to everyday life since consumers actively define and integrate brands into their lifestyles, but this only emerges after the consumer has co-created a meaning for that brand. Furthermore,

brands are often credited for adding value for consumers by providing choice and increasing competition in the marketplace (e.g. Ambler, 1997). Therefore, an underpinning in any branding endeavour is the concept of differentiation, which is achieved by creating a unique position for the brand in the minds of the consumers (Ries et al, 1986). If such a position is accomplished, it creates symbolic differences, which are often celebrated for creating real value for consumers, as individuals will seek out the brands that will deliver the most desirable experience (Firat, 1991). But, what happens if these symbolic difference cannot be ascertained prior to purchase? Does this mean pre-purchase marketing for a HE brand is not going to work?

The philosophical implications of brand meaning cannot be fully explained through either a top-down or bottom-up approach to the structure and agency question (Miles, 1999). Indeed, as Mead (1934, p. 15) argues, *"the individual constitutes society as much as society constitutes the individual"*. Dittmar (1992) further notes that individuals are simultaneously creators and products of the social world and as such, identity is part of each person's subjective reality, but can only be so, in as much as it is also formed in a cultural context. As Schroeder and Salzer-Marling (cited in Ritzer & Ryan, (Eds.). (2010, p. xi) put it *"neither managers nor consumers completely control branding processes, cultural codes constrain how brands work to produce meaning"*. What this suggests is that any understanding of brand meaning needs to be powered by an investment in both the continuous activity of human agency and the active communality of the production of the social world (Dawe, 1978). The theoretical insights of co-creation of value are useful in this respect. By focusing on co-creation, we begin to understand that brand meaning is derived from dialogues; co-creation allows brands and customers to create value through interaction. However, in these instances value is usually determined before a market exchange can take place

in the physical goods sphere (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2004a & b; Vargo & Lusch, 2004a & b). Therefore, understanding what this means for a service environment such as HE will contribute to a better understanding of brand meaning making.

The research on brand meaning co-creation has evolved: brand control has been challenged (Shao, Jones, & Grace, 2015). While some research advocates that brand management teams still have most of the power and a strong influence in the development and management of brand meaning (Urde, 2016), other studies contend that the branding process has been transformed and the control of brand meaning has been mostly relinquished, as brands are co-created with agents that are part of a network of associations and do not work in the company (Cova & Paranque, 2016). The democratisation of communication has played a significant role in this. That is, a dominant feature of consumerism and capitalist society is the ubiquitous information which was previously provided by the gatekeepers of the brand but is now easily accessible, fragmented, user-generated and intertwined (Taylor, 2014). This has been brought about through advances in technology, specifically social networking sites and Web 2.0 technologies (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). As such, communication developments reduced the role of meta-narratives in contemporary society and led to a constant interaction of heterogeneous subjective components (Lyotard, 1984; Taylor, 2014). Since consumers are no longer willing to commit or conform to any unified and consistent idea, system, narrative or identity, the emergence of postmodern consumer society, and subsequent contemporary interpretations of branding, have challenged traditional approaches. In addition to this, branding in the services context is even more complex as the product offering is intangible (Bateson, 1977, 1979; Berry, 2002; Chapleo 2008; De Chernatony &

Dall'Olmo Riley 1998; Gronroos, 1990; Zeithaml et al., 1985). Because of this, there is a need to understand how and when brand meaning is co-created in the HE environment across the consumer journey to advance knowledge in this contemporary area and gain a better understanding of university brands.

Limited direct research has focused on brand meaning co-creation in the HE environment, it has already been established in the service literature that meaning is co-created during the experience, therefore, charting this brand meaning co-creation across a journey from a student consumer perspective by focussing on the complex details of brand meaning co-creations, is a different approach within the postmodern HE era. In addition to this, it is well established that post-1992 universities experience unique challenges in attempting to differentiate their offerings from competitors (Chapleo, 2007; Jevons, 2006). Traditional red brick universities, typically find it easier to differentiate themselves and gain significant national and international brand recognition in the sector (Chapleo, 2007; Hemsley-Brown, Lowrie, & Chapleo, 2010; Jevons, 2006) therefore, providing a clear rationale for focusing analysis on a single post-1992 university. In order for the thesis to gain a more comprehensive view of student consumer experiences, the research needs to understand deeply how student consumers' perceptions and evaluations of their experiences changes over time and how this influences the construction of brand meaning (Dean et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has been suggested (Gambetti et al., 2013) that longitudinal studies could offer appropriate insights into consumer engagement processes in different contexts. Therefore, a longitudinal approach will be adopted that focuses on three distinct stages; prior to consumption, initial consumption and after the exchange takes place (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006).

The debate on who controls brand meaning in the postmodern era, and at what point it is co-created has different implications for the branding of services as opposed to goods. This thesis will explore how brand meaning is co-created in the contemporary environment through understanding consumer awareness of branding in the English higher education market.

2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter began with an overview of the marketisation of English HE. Contributions made by modern and postmodern marketing and branding theory in the commercial sector were reviewed. The specific purpose of this chapter was to explore the extant literature in the areas of modern and postmodern branding theory, as well as the theory of value co-creation, which are well established in the marketing sector but less well explored within the HE literature. The chapter concluded by establishing that meaning co-creation in service brands can be explored across a journey by focusing on social links which assist consumers in their identity construction.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.0 Chapter Three Introduction

Thus far, the thesis has mainly been concerned with critical debates relating to the co-creation of brand meaning in the contemporary consumer environment. This chapter provides comprehensive insight into the methodological approach taken and details of the data collection methods used. The methodology is intended to assist in answering the research question: *"how is brand meaning co-created in the postmodern era through an understanding of consumer awareness of branding in the English HE sector".* Therefore, the overall objective of this chapter is to develop an appropriate interpretivist methodology that enables student consumers to describe their journey and the explicit and implicit co-created meanings, which reveal how they interpret marketing strategies within their socio-cultural environments, prior to, during and after university choice takes place. This is presented diagrammatically in Figure 2 in Section 1.4.

3.1 Research Philosophies

The intention of this section is to position the current thesis within an interpretivist, postmodern framework, where inquiry seeks to understand and interpret phenomena through the construction and reconstruction of the meanings attributed to student consumers' lived experiences of the brand (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Milliken

(2001) maintains that increasingly an interpretative approach has been used in research areas of business management and particularly marketing. For the current study it was important to gain an insight into the perceptions of the student consumers across a journey and the research philosophy was therefore that of the interpretivist as it is an approach *"that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order"* (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 17). This also assisted in a consideration of the culture and environment in which those brand meaning perceptions emerged. Creswell (2007) states that researchers approach a study with their own set of beliefs and worldviews that inform the manner in which the study is conducted and reported. Therefore, in the case of this researcher, a lecturer in HE, the paradigm helped the researcher to make sense of the world and it was in this context that the researcher sought to understand how others viewed the concept of brand meaning in HE. Crucially, it is incumbent on the researcher to make these beliefs explicit to the reader so that the reader is informed of the manner in which the study is to be reviewed (Gummesson, 1991). Therefore, it is appropriate to acknowledge the researcher's methodological journey before progressing to a discussion of methods. Furthermore, Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 105) go as far as to claim, *"questions of methods are secondary to questions of paradigm"*. This position is expanded on by a number of authors (Gerring, 2006; Hirschman, 1986; Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) who believe all scientific inquiry requires the researcher to undergo a process of engagement with the chosen subject matter, by interacting with it through a specific frame of reference. This reference frame is *"a particular set of lenses for seeing the world and making sense of it in different ways"*, which is determined by the researcher's beliefs of the nature of the social world (Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008 p. 631). Such beliefs of the world constitute a paradigm and paradigms allow researchers to distinguish

relationships between variables that specify appropriate methodological procedures in order to conduct particular research (Crotty, 1998). Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest paradigms that define the nature of the world, the researcher's relationship with the world, representing a worldview and how that world can be investigated. As such, a paradigm guides how meaning will be constructed from the data, based on individual experiences. Paradigms are therefore fundamental to this research as they determine what is to be explored and how the investigation can be conducted (Sobh & Perry, 2006) in the search for understanding brand meaning in HE.

It is clear that selecting the appropriate research choice and use of research methodology is derived from the research paradigm itself (Collis & Hussy, 2003; Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano, & Morales, 2007). The focus of this thesis was to explore distinct situations (emerging brand meaning) at three different stages: pre-purchase, initial purchase and established consumption, to determine similarities and differences extrapolated from the experiences that student consumers shared with the researcher. Their individual distinct world views regarding descriptions in time (prior, arrival and purchase) steered the research. In addition to this, and drawing insight from the extant literature on paradigms, it was important for the researcher to gain an in depth understanding of the research journey by engaging with the competing assumptions underpinning the paradigms.

Indeed, it has been acknowledged that the quality of research is enhanced if the researcher actively engages with philosophical and methodological debates (Creswell, 2009; Seale 1999). Therefore, it is vital to consider the assumptions of competing paradigms in order to ascertain whether they are consistent with the researcher's own values (Sobh & Perry, 2006). An important part of this debate is the philosophical and methodological journey of the researcher in this thesis. This has included the

realisation and subsequent questioning of previous paradigms (occupied by positivism and its variants) the researcher has been exposed to, that have been acquired through the researcher's academic socialisation process (Shankar & Patterson, 2001). Traces of the socialisation journey appeared throughout the thesis (e.g. seeking to analyse netnographic data through content analysis), but specifically in the findings section where at times the researcher demonstrated the search for a 'correct' or 'right' brand meaning. Resultantly, because the researcher actively engaged with these philosophical and methodological debates early on in the research journey, this socialisation process was recognised instantly, that is, the on-going negotiation process between the researcher's former academic self, i.e. an implicit acceptance that positivism and its variants was the 'right way' to of doing research, to the emerging academic self of oppositional interpretive forces (Shankar & Patterson, 2001).

Expectedly, there are many contradicting views and beliefs when considering the different research paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These arguments are not limited to differences between paradigms but also intra-paradigmatic similarities (Giddens, 1976). Important aspects of this perplexing debate are born of the complex background knowledge and philosophical commitments of the researcher themselves, either implicitly or explicitly generated and *"rarely consciously and deliberately adopted"* (Hawkins & Pea, 1987, p. 292). It is clear that each paradigm has a unique set of generically accepted positions regarding ontology, epistemology and methodology, therefore in deciding on how best to conduct research it is useful to begin by contrasting the paradigms in terms of their ontological, epistemological, and methodological bases. The next section discusses these keys differences by presenting a consistent effort to rationalise the research's ontological/epistemological

dispositions that support the adoption of an interpretivist postmodern philosophical stance for this thesis.

3.2 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology concerns *"what there is to know about the world"* (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014 p. 4), central to this, the ontological question asks whether the researcher perceives reality as objective, existing external to the individual and their subjective interpretations, or whether it is through meanings which have been socially (subjectively) constructed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Put simply, these divided ontological positions argue that either reality exists as separate from human action in it, or that reality is shaped by human action, and can be continually changed by it. Epistemology relates to what constitutes acceptable knowledge (Cleveland & Bartsch, 2018; Corbetta, 2003), and how this knowledge is collected; epistemology refers to the relationship between the researcher and the reality being studied (Krauss, 2005) and therefore provides answers to questions relating to the scope and methods of knowing.

Questions of methodology refer to how reality can be explored (Corbetta, 2003) and the way in which methods are utilised. Just as epistemological assumptions are constrained by ontological assumptions, so too are methodology concerns and therefore a strong connection emerges between the research paradigm and research method (Crotty, 1998). As Bryman (1984, p. 76) writing in his seminal text suggests, *"the choice of a particular epistemological base leads to a preference for a particular method on the grounds of its greater appropriateness given the preceding philosophical deliberations"*. Crotty (1998) agrees and recommends that researchers should build upward from the foundational block of ontology to epistemology, methodology, methods. That said, in reality, the research that comprises this thesis

was not a linear process, it was iterative. Part of this iterative nature of inquiry allowed the thesis to map brand meaning in the HE environment as a process involving iterations across a network of associations. This inquiry yielded new ideas, which, in turn, fed back into the data collection (tools) and analysis stage e.g. the narratives that emerged in the netnographic data in the first stage of the journey subsequently informed discussion in the second stage of the journey. Therefore, initial decisions made early on in the thesis research design were often revisited in the light of new insights or practical problems encountered along the way (e.g. as the researcher's socialisation journey progressed, it became clear that the final study would require interviews with a different sample than the one used for the second study). For that reason, although the research process was guided by the thesis' philosophical and methodological considerations, it was not as straightforward as Crotty (1998) suggested. Nevertheless, it was important to have a firm understanding of the aspects, which comprise paradigms, as this has significant repercussions for every subsequent decision made in the research process (e.g. shaping the analysis), including choice of methodology and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Therefore, in order to address this, the next section discusses the dominant research paradigms in consumer research.

3.2.1 Research Philosophies in the Social Sciences – Interpretivism v Positivism

A number of paradigms exist which can be contrasted in terms of their ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations. These approaches differ according to their principles surrounding the nature of reality (ontology), the acquisition of knowledge (epistemology), and the methods implemented to explore phenomena (Bryman & Becker 2012; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Morgan and Smircich (1980, p. 493) argue, *"as we pass from assumption to assumption along the subjective-objective continuum, the nature of what constitutes adequate knowledge changes"*.

Nevertheless, for some time there have been two dominant, competing and much contrasting approaches to seeking knowledge in social sciences, more specifically, in the field of consumer research: positivism and interpretivism. The ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of the positivist and interpretivist paradigms will be discussed as the researcher determines the congruity of the various research paradigms with their own worldview while considering the research aims and objectives. Of particular importance is the ontological position of a particular paradigm, because this decision will go on to influence the choices available in answering the epistemological question, which in turn will limit the possible responses to the methodological question (Morgan, 1983).

3.2.2 Positivism

A wealth of enquiry on human and consumer experience has centred on the dominant doctrine of positivism and has dominated the field of consumer research (Crotty, 1998; Patterson & Williams, 1998). Positivism assumes that it can explain and predict consumer behaviour scientifically under universal law. Ontologically, positivism argues reality is separate to individual perception, exists outside the mind of the individual, and is knowable in its totality (Corbetta, 2003; Sobh & Perry, 2006). Epistemologically, within the positivist paradigm the researcher and the subject are independent of one another (dualist), with neither influencing the other (objective) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Krauss, 2005). Knowledge comprises of generalisations of cause and effect which are time and context free (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, its ontology suggests that consumer behaviour is deterministic, time-free and context independent, whereas epistemologically, a positivist approach can be employed to explain real causes of consumer behaviour. The primary method of investigation into this reality is theory testing governed by explicit theories and hypothesis (Guba &

Lincoln, 1994). For that reason, the positivist paradigm uses quantifiable methods to identify and generalise relationships among variables for predictions in other time periods or contexts.

3.2.2.1 Challenges to Positivism

Historically, the positivist approach has been widely employed and has produced useful consumer knowledge with many positivist studies providing some invaluable perspectives to the field of marketing and consumer behaviour (e.g. Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). However, a number of researchers have argued that the positivist approach is not suitable for explaining the complexities of human experience, for example, Morgan and Smircich (1980, p. 489) argue that positivist methods *"reduce the role of human beings to elements subject to the influence of a more or less deterministic set of forces"*. In addition to this Elliott (1999, p. 118) posits; *"The positivist practice of "scientific" marketing research cannot cope with such a constructed reality and is likely to produce superficial knowledge rather than meaningful understanding".* Furthermore, the implications of this philosophy for research methodology have been widely reviewed by many researchers (see Belk et al., 1989; Belk, 1998; Hirschman, 1986; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Peter & Olsen, 1983). These reviews revised conceptual understanding and methodological breakthroughs occurred in consumer behaviour research. These discussions confirmed that such a view (positivist) encounters difficulties in obtaining holistic insight into the meanings of consumer experiences with brands and is therefore unsuitable for exploring a social phenomenon such as brand meanings in higher education, which involves humans, their journey and their experiences. A further problem relating to the positivist paradigm and the research aim of this thesis relates to the issue of *"context stripping"* (Guba & Lincoln,

1994, p. 106). The quantitative methods favoured by positivist researchers result in a reductionist approach, which leads to the stripping of context from findings and disregards the ambiguity, complexity, deeper insights and fluidity of consumer realities (e.g. the postmodern self and consumption meaning). This is an important consideration for the current thesis as the nature and structure of English universities as businesses are by their very nature context bound. Therefore, in order to understand human experience and thus consumer experience, consideration of locally contextual aspects such as society, culture, language, practices, rules and conventions are required; it is essential to study the human subject in the natural setting of cultural contexts (McCracken, 1986). Importantly, the multifaceted and paradoxical nature of human experience must be acknowledged and the researcher employ various perspectives, particularly perspectives of the human subject studied, to interpret it (Firat & Venkatesh 1995; Nietzsche 1967). It is therefore necessary to consider a paradigm of inquiry that is capable of accommodating more complex social phenomena while preserving an appreciation of contextual facets.

3.2.3 Interpretivism

Acknowledging the complex nature of human experience, there is a considerable amount of literature in consumer research which advocates interpretivism in seeking this knowledge (e.g., Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Arnould & Price, 1993, 2000; Belk, 1998; Elliott, 1996; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992; Holbrook, 1995; Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1988; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Sherry 1990; Thompson et al., 1994; Wallendorf & Arnould 1991). The ontological position of interpretivism justifies the adoption of this paradigm in this thesis. Interpretivism maintains that there is not one external reality as held by positivism, but rather multiple constructions and interpretations of reality with the aim of developing an understanding of the subjective

meaning of social phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Corbetta, 2003). Interpretivism acknowledges that consumers are socially constructed, thus their behaviour needs to be interpreted with subjective meaning at the core of this knowledge. The interpretive ontology, founded as it is on meaning and interpretation, clearly recognises the influence of context, which predicates that any phenomenon will vary according to particular times and circumstances (Peter & Olson, 1989). Accordingly, consumers should not be studied in isolation from their socio-cultural contexts and it becomes necessary to understand humans as social actors (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992). In contrast to the dualist and objective position of positivism, the stance of interpretivism is that the researcher and the subject are not separate entities (Corbetta, 2003) because consumption experiences are temporal and contextual and should be analysed holistically in a natural setting.

In summary, two major implications are established from the ontological position held within interpretive inquiry. First, reality is plural not singular. The fact that each individual must construct a meaningful conception of reality dictates that the subjective construction process will result in personalised, individualistic realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Second, each individual will perceive the varying phenomena of existence from slightly different perspectives and, as a result, the totalisation of these perspectives into a meaningful construction of reality will result in idiosyncratic ontological conceptions (Hudson, & Ozanne, 1988, p. 2). As Guba & Lincoln (1994, p. 110-111) state:

> *"Realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature (although elements are often shared among many individuals and even across*

cultures), and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions".

Thus, in summary the interpretive paradigm in consumer research has adopted a relativist ontology, which posits an active individual, socially contextualised, constructing a subjective reality from the day to day interpretations of natural phenomena (Gergen, 2009). Clearly, such a radical departure from the realist ontology maintained by positivistic consumer research (Hudson, & Ozanne, 1988, p. 3) will result in markedly differing inquiry styles.

3.2.3.1 The Subjective Nature of Inquiry – Idiographic Knowledge

Unlike positivism, interpretivism does not seek nomothetic knowledge in order to explain and predict consumer behaviour; rather it seeks idiographic knowledge in an attempt to understand the malleable, multi-layered and inconsistent nature of consumer experiences (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988) e.g. understanding multiple, context-dependent student consumer perceptions of brand meaning in HE. What this means is that an idiographic mode of inquiry is concerned with the uniqueness of an individual's subjective experiences, rather than striving for generalisations that explain wider social patterns. See Figure 10 for key differences in the nature of inquiry.

Figure 10. Hudson & Ozanne's (1988) summary of differences in the nature of inquiry.

Assumptions	Interpretive	Positivist
Ontological		
Nature of reality	Socially constructed	Objective, tangible
	Multiple	Single
	Holistic	Fragmentable
	Contextual	Divisible
Nature of social beings	Voluntaristic	Deterministic
	Proactive	Reactive
Axiological		
Overriding goal	Understanding	Explanation
Epistemological		
Knowledge generated	Idiographic	Nomothetic
	Time-bound	Time-free
	Context-dependent	Context-independent
View of causality	Multiple, simultaneous shaping	Real causes exist
Research relationship	Interactive, co-operative	Dualism, separation
	No privileged point of observation	Privileged point of observation

Source: Hudson and Ozanne (1988: 509)

The entire premise of interpretive research is to attempt to understand and describe the meanings inherent in different phenomena. It is therefore essential that interpretive inquiry attempts to study these phenomena in the *"natural worlds of the everyday"* (Denzin, 2017, p. 22) where meaning is less likely to be altered than if it were explored in an unfamiliar context. Attention now turns to developing this research setting for the current thesis.

3.2.3.2 Methodological Assumptions of Interpretivism

As a result of the ontological and epistemological stances of interpretivism adopted in this thesis, the primary object of research cannot be measured, analysed or realised

through the use of quantitative techniques (Corbetta, 2003). Instead, qualitative techniques, which permit the researcher to explore the meanings that subjects ascribe to their actions, are required (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000; della Porta & Keating, 2008). The qualitative approach of the current research can be justified on the grounds of 'methodological fit' (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). This 'fit' refers to internal consistency among elements of the research project, research question, prior work, research design, and theoretical contribution (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). As previously acknowledged, quantitative methods strip context from findings, a phenomenon is removed from its natural setting and studied in a controlled environment, in contrast, an important strength of qualitative methods is their focus on collecting data pertaining to *"naturally occurring, ordinary events, in natural settings"* (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). An understanding of context allows for an appreciation of how events/experiences, actions and meanings are influenced by the circumstances in which they occur (Maxwell, 2012). Of particular relevance to this thesis is how the use of qualitative methods permits an understanding of how brand meaning is co-created in English HE in the contemporary consumer society. Therefore, because an understanding of individuals' perceptions concerning brand meaning was required and there was a need to enquire about their experiences at university and their resultant behaviour, an important consideration of the qualitative paradigm for this thesis was that the data was characterised by a *"richness and fullness"* (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Wilson 2009, p. 482). It has also been noted that a qualitative approach can be particularly useful for research in the marketing and consumer research field, as it is exploratory in nature (Kaufmann, Kapoulas, & Mitic, 2012) and concerns itself with the experiences of individuals. It offers the advantage of helping to address complex issues, where the researcher focuses on as many details

as possible, rather than to establish unambiguous cause and effect relationships between single variables (Gummesson, 2005, p. 312). This qualitative approach to addressing the complexities involved in brand meaning proved useful for exploring the case study in this thesis. For example, it had already been established in the service literature that meaning is co-created during the experience, yet, by focussing on the complex details of brand meaning co-creations the thesis was able to map how this co-creation takes place in the HE environment.

This study is positioned within a contemporary era and an interpretivist postmodern paradigm where the phenomena under exploration and the relationship between those phenomena are not well understood. This is because limited direct research has focused on brand meaning co-creation in the HE environment; furthermore, charting this brand meaning co-creation across a journey from a student consumer perspective is a novel approach within the postmodern era. Therefore, in order to grasp the complexity and inconsistency of the postmodern era, the study design considered the interpretive process because it did *"not assume any one answer to explaining consumer behaviour, or one single solution, but approaches consumer culture expecting to find multiple meanings and a rich construction of reality and illusion beyond the merely rational"* (Elliott 1999, p. 121). A further consideration to add to this complexity was that the postmodern contemporary environment has been described as essentially a consumer society (Holt, 2002). Therefore, the postmodern individual can be best understood through consumption (Slater, 1997). This is a complicated notion in an environment such as HE where there is resistance to discuss students as consumers that are fragmented, hyperreal with multiple identities (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). As such, an interpretive paradigm that allows for an understanding

of the multifaceted, malleable and contextual postmodern consumer could only do justice to an exploration of student consumers brand meaning making.

3.2.3.1 The Process of Theory Generation in Interpretivist Research

The research in this thesis was guided by *"the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world"* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008 p. 10) and how it should be studied and understood. Therefore, the method of induction was adopted which Guba and Lincoln (1984, p. 113) describe as an 'open process' as the findings are employed to create new theory (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2009). Part of this 'open process' relies on the researcher recognising that it is impossible to generate interpretive value-free research, because each researcher, in interpreting the phenomenon being studied, brings their own personal preconceptions to the hermeneutic task (Denzin, 1989, p. 23). Instead, researchers are themselves part of the meaning-based sphere they are trying to explore, and as a result, they can only hope to gain a *"fusion of interpretive perspectives between researcher and research informants"* (Thompson et al., 1994, p. 435). In effect, the emic account which includes the perspectives of the natives and the reasons for their beliefs/behaviours, is an interpretation of an interpretation (Schwandt, 1994; Spiggle, 1994) or a *"double hermeneutic*" (Giddens, 1976, p. 146). The interpretive researcher is constantly aware of their own subjective influence and perspective even during the emic stage of interpretation. As a consequence, throughout the data collection and analysis stages of this thesis the researcher acknowledged their own interpretative work as part of the analysis of the phenomena being researched and as the analysis progressed. Furthermore, the researcher recognised that in making sense of a student consumer's sense making journey, the researcher themselves imposed a second level of interpretation, that was also subject to understanding (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998). Therefore, the researcher was reflexive about their

interpretative enquiry and aspired to detach but at the same time accept that ultimately it is unfeasible to completely detach (Spiggle, 1994). This reflexivity was achieved by challenging some of the implicit assumptions that the researcher held. This included challenging the implicit assumptions, which had emerged due to the researcher's role as a lecturer in marketing, in two different faculties where the research was conducted, as well as the researcher's past experiences with sport communities having participated/represented in a sport at a national level. Furthermore, it was also important to acknowledge the researcher was in fact, first and foremost, a consumer and a student before a researcher of student consumers, this allowed the researcher to position themselves as un-detached from the participants they were studying. Therefore, during the course of the data collection for this thesis, researcher field notes and a reflective journal was used to assist reflexivity as a researcher and to add to the richness of the account offered when reporting the qualitative data collection and analysis.

Theory-building researchers typically combine multiple data collection methods (Eisenhardt, 1989; Shah & Corley, 2006). Therefore, this thesis used three different modes of data collection (netnography, focus groups, semi-structured interviews), not only because this is typical of theory building research but also due to the fact that each method was aligned to and deemed as the most effective way to explore the three different stages under consideration across the student consumer journey. It has also been suggested that in situations where the generation of empirically valid theory is required (Eisenhardt, 1989; Woodside & Wilson, 2003), a case study approach to addressing the research aims and objectives is an appropriate method, specifically when addressing the 'how' and 'why' questions of research (Yin, 2009). Case study research places emphasis on the natural setting in which events occur and was

therefore congruous with the research aims of this thesis, which required an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural and organisational processes (Yin, 2009) in the HE environment. By considering the research problem, the nature of the phenomena in question, and the ontological appropriateness and epistemology of the interpretivist paradigm, a case study approach was therefore justified in the context of the thesis. The emphasis on the natural setting to elicit in depth discussion on brand meaning in the HE environment prompted this decision and therefore the following section discusses the design of the research.

3.3 Research Methodology – A Single Case Study Approach

Case studies are *"comprehensive methodologies"* (Carson et al., 2001, p. 71), this is because a case study is an *"exploration of multiple perspectives which are rooted in a particular context"* (Ritchie, An, Cone, & Bullock, 2013, p. 66). These multiple perspectives of evidence provide a *"family of answers"* which enables reality to be *"known"* in all of its contingent contexts (Sobh & Perry, 2006, p. 1203). This aligned with the current thesis, as perceptions from different groups of students were sought on branding in one university setting. Furthermore, the review of extant literature played a critical role in the adoption of the case study for this thesis as Powell, Balmer, Melewar, & Liao (2007) consider the case study approach the most relevant when little is known about a particular phenomenon e.g. student consumers' brand meaning co-creation in the HE environment.

According to Eisenhardt (1989), although the terms qualitative and case study are frequently applied interchangeably (e.g., Yin, 1981), case study research can involve quantitative data only, qualitative only, or both (Yin, 1984). It is also possible to combine several cases studies, whereby the researcher is studying multiple cases to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008;

Stake, 1995), but Gerring (2006) states that as the numbers increase it is not possible to study these as intensely, and they may therefore provide superficial knowledge rather than meaningful understanding. Consequently, it was the depth of inquiry required, and the potential insight key participants could provide into the brand meaning of the university, that determined the superiority of a single case study over multiple cases. This thesis focused on one case, which was a post-1992 university in the north east of England.

3.3.1 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis defines what constitutes a case. In social science research, typical units of analysis include individuals (most common), groups, social organisations and social objects, but ultimately, the definition of the unit of analysis will depend upon the case being studied and the research questions (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003). The research aims identified one post-1992 university as the primary unit of analysis. This is because previous research (Chapleo, 2007) has established that redbrick universities and post-1992 institutions are generally viewed as quite different to each other, with many red brick university brands uniquely differentiated and positioned from the post-1992 university brands. What this means is the traditional red brick universities, some of these (24) now grouped around the more common term 'Russell Group,' typically find it easier to differentiate themselves and gain significant national and international brand recognition in the sector (Chapleo, 2007). Consequently, researchers (Hemsley-Brown, Lowrie, & Chapleo, 2010; Jevons, 2006) have highlighted that post-1992 universities find it difficult to achieve similar differentiation and recognition levels in an environment full of already similar offerings. Therefore, this provided the rationale for focusing analysis on a single post-1992 university.

3.3.2 Longitudinal Cases

A further concern in the design of case study research relates to whether the case(s) will be conducted with data collected at one point in time (cross-sectional), or with data collected over a period of time, or at two or more points in time (longitudinal) (Yin, 2009). Based on the current research aims, one of which was to explore the consumption journey of student consumers, and their socialisation from pre-purchase to purchase, it was decided that a longitudinal design was the most appropriate in the context of this thesis. The duration of this longitudinal journey lasted 33 months in total; 21 months of exploration took place for the pre-purchase journey with a further 12 months focusing on arrival and the end of first year experiences. Chapter 2 highlighted that the consumer experience is a dynamic phenomenon, emerging during various phases of the customer journey, including for example, search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale encounters. Furthermore, these stages typically involved multiple channels and multiple touchpoints. As such, in order for the thesis to gain a more comprehensive view of student consumer experiences, the research needed to understand deeply how student consumers' perceptions and evaluations of their experiences changed over time and how this influenced the construction of brand meaning (Dean et al., 2016). Therefore, a longitudinal approach was chosen as being more appropriate than a cross-sectional approach, with a longitudinal study enabling both the required depth of insight into the phenomena being studied (Gerring, 2006) over the student consumer journey and a focus on three distinct stages; prior to consumption, initial consumption and after the exchange takes place (Penaloza & Venkatesh, 2006).

3.3.3 Selection of Case – The Sample

Sampling involves the initial selection of the case (the university) and within-case sampling in terms of the participants, observations, documents etc. (Patton, 2002). As the case has already been established, this section considers within case sampling. As discussed, the development of theory is a central activity in consumer research, in addition to this, the selection of cases is an important aspect of building theory from case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Therefore, the selection of cases must be purposive as opposed to randomised, as would be the case (adopting a randomised strategy) in hypothetico-deductive studies (Eisenhardt, 1989), that is, a sample which is selected, based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In sampling as with other elements of the research design the decisions are based upon the preceding issues of ontology and epistemology, there are broadly two types of sample: probability and non-probability, associated closely with respectively positivist, quantitative studies or interpretivist, qualitative inquiry. In effect, because the need to generalise is negated by an idiographic approach in the thesis, there is no epistemological necessity to attempt to draw a sample, which is statistically representative of a larger population. Indeed, one of the main advantages of purposive sampling was that the data collection strategies could be varied and altered accordingly as part of the emergent design of the inquiry, which in turn ensured that the putative aims of the research were achieved (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 431).

Given the originality of the research phenomenon and the anecdotal observations of issues and challenges faced by a specific institution, the approach adopted in this study was that of purposive snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). For example, certain student groups belonging to one university were identified, approached and asked to be

involved. One outcome of this selection strategy however was that the cases were restricted in terms of geographical scope to the north east of England, Newcastle upon Tyne. Although purposive sampling has been adopted in general to approach the research objectives in this thesis, each individual study, which made up the three stages of the student consumer journey under exploration, utilised a slightly different selection process. The principle according to which the research developed, and the sample within that research, emerged practically in line with the apparent needs of the research as it progressed, and according to what was judged as being the most appropriate means of addressing specific research questions and areas of research interest, as they occurred. For example, the first stage of the journey, the pre-purchase stage, selected participants based on the use of a specific hashtag in an online environment. What emerged from this was a need to explore a specific group of students with a precise criterion such as course enrolled on at a specific time in order to map the journey further (see each stage of research design for specific detail in Figure 2, Section 1.4). Furthermore, the principle behind each of the discussed strategies for the three stages was to ensure that the samples selected for each study were rich in the data relevant to developing an in-depth understanding of the co-creation of brand meaning. Each specific sampling strategy will be discussed in the data collection section for each of the stages (see Section 3.4).

3.3.4 Limitations Considered of Case Study Approaches for Research Design

While case studies represent a common approach within marketing and consumer behaviour research, a number of concerns related to the approach persist. Due to conflicting epistemological hypotheses and the intricacy characteristic in qualitative case studies, many researchers (Gustafsson, 2017; Ritchie et al., 2013) have suggested that it is difficult to describe what a case study is. However, Yin (2009, p. 18) explains

that what distinguishes the case study method from other approaches is that it provides the researcher with an opportunity to understand *"a real-life phenomenon in-depth"* including contextual situations. Importantly, Cohen (2003, p. 257) claims that case study research often follows the interpretive paradigm and views the circumstances *"through the eyes of participants"*.

A second concern relates to what is alleged to be the lack of methodological rigour in case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). Yin (2009), refutes this claim by asserting that in such instances it is the researcher, and not the case study approach, which is lacking in methodological rigour. A further critique corresponds to differences within the samples. Ritchie et al. (2013) point to the design stage of a case study and disparities that may well occur between populations involved in the research. Cohen (2003) and Yin (2009) adds to this by citing situations occur that may be unique to a particular case study making it more challenging to demonstrate reliability. However, with reference to the current thesis, the researcher felt sufficiently familiar with the context, particularly as access to the place of research study was made best use of, in which to gather the case study evidence. This is because the researcher is a university lecturer at the institution under exploration and is thus familiar with the working environment being researched. Therefore, taking account of these concerns within the research design, the next section will explicitly articulate the basis upon which the research was conducted and consider the different types of methods that were appropriate for this particular context in order that the rigour of the inquiry was ensured.

3.4 Research Methods – Data Collection Processes

Data collection of the three stages for this thesis drew from a combination of direct observations in the form of netnography, focus group discussions and semi-structured

interviews supporting one of the major strengths of case study data collection which *"is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence"* (Yin 2009, pp. 114-115). Cognisant of the research objectives, it was determined that each of these data collection methods revealed different aspects of empirical reality (Denzin, 1978). The rationale for adopting such methods is linked to the overall aim of exploring at what point on the student consumer journey brand meaning emerges. The first stage of the journey (pre-purchase) adopted a netnographic approach. This method used direct observations of two social media platforms and a hashtag as the communicator. This allowed for observations of the initial discussions taking place regarding the student consumer journey and the impact this had on the creation of brand meaning at this stage to be made. The second stage of the journey used focus groups. The focus groups furthered the initial online pre-purchase discussions and provided an opportunity to check on the development of the initial themes identified in stage one. Focus groups were an effective method for talking to students, particularly as a greater number could be interviewed. Finally, in the third stage of the journey, the use of semi-structured interviews enabled respondents to communicate their individual perspectives on university brand meaning; the interviews were extremely useful for exploring the student consumers' individual interpretative strategies and drawing out core themes for the entire study.

Having explored the extant literature on modern branding, postmodern branding and the theory of co-creation, the subsequent sections focus on using a co-creative framework to adopt appropriate methods and conduct three studies, which allows for the mapping of brand meaning on the student consumer longitudinal journey, with a specific focus on pre-purchase, initial purchase and an established consumption stage.

3.4.1 Collection of Data: Netnography – The Pre-Purchase Stage

Netnography, an online research method originating in ethnography, uses online conversations as data and is an interpretive research method that adapts the traditional, in-person participant observation techniques of ethnography to the study of interactions and experiences manifesting through digital communications (Kozinets 1998, 2002b). As such, the first stage of the research journey was concerned with students' conversations and interactions about their experiences with the university in an online environment. What was most important about the netnographic adoption was the access it afforded to a sample group (pre-purchase) which would have been a challenge to explore through any other means. Hence, the netnographer can operate in a covert fashion and observe participant discussions about their university pre-purchase journey online, without bias or interference. Observing behaviour of consumers within an online community can help marketing researchers and practitioners understand consumers' self-representation and the system of meaning (Kozinets, 2010). Furthermore, inductive analysis of data is appropriate to produce an account of how people in a setting experience it and the meanings that the setting has for them (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). By doing so, data collected in the thesis was representative of the student consumers' thoughts and experiences and therefore the researcher's *"own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their co-patriots are up to"* (Geertz, 1973, p. 149). It is for these reasons a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002a & b) was chosen as a method for the first stage. In addition to this, using netnography had several advantages; due to its naturalistic and unobtrusive research approach within the unique contingencies of computer mediated social interaction (Kozinets, 2010), netnography provided access to the prospective students at the initial point where they had initiated the process of associating

themselves with the university online in the public domain. Thus, netnography enabled the role of a covert non-participant observer. This meant that researcher presence was unobtrusive and did not become an unwelcome outside influence, which can be a limitation within traditional ethnography (Elliott & Jankel-Elliot, 2003). The benefits of this for the pre-purchase stage of the student consumer journey guaranteed the digital traces of naturally occurring public conversations recorded in contemporary communications networks. The networks were a place where students felt at ease discussing such topics and therefore were more likely to be open and honest throughout their interactions about their experiences.

Kozinets (1998, 2002b) demonstrated that marketers could obtain insights on consumption from engaging with online communities in the late 1990s, before social media and their accompanying Web 2.0 technologies experienced the popularity and access it has in the contemporary era. Kozinets (1998) argued these online communities offered marketers the opportunity to insert, defend, alter and reinforce brand meanings in these types of environments. It is because of this knowledge and awareness of how consumers interact with each other and with brands online that brands can promote their offerings on multiple levels (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, while understanding can be gained by conducting surveys online, netnography provided an additional level of insight and understanding due to its immersive nature. This method has been employed by marketing and business management research to reveal the social, cultural and symbolic meanings associated with consumption (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Kozinets, 2002b) and because of this it is therefore an appropriate method to adopt for exploring student consumers' pre-purchase experiences in the HE environment.

The steps for conducting a netnography started with developing the research question and choosing an appropriate field to study (Kozinets, 2002b, 2015). The field in this case refers to the digital domain and its members. After the appropriate field was selected, the procedure listed below in Table 1 was followed, which demonstrates the steps the current study progressed through in the context of the case study which comprises this thesis.

The university Twitter and Instagram platforms were selected for this study. Twitter is a microblogging form of social networking service; users post and interact with messages known as tweets. Tweets were originally restricted to 140 characters, but in 2017 this limit was doubled to 280, however for the purpose of this study's research, it is important to note that data was recorded in an era when tweets were confined to 140 characters. Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social networking service, this social media platform allows users to upload photos/videos, which can be edited with various filters, and organised with hashtags and location information. Hashtags are a common functionality associated with both platforms allowing users to apply user-generated tagging which makes it possible for others to easily find messages with a specific theme or content. The research followed the five criteria proposed by Kozinets (2002b, p. 63) for choosing suitable online communities for netnography: (1) a focused topic; (2) high posting traffic; (3) a high number of discrete message posters; (4) detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) a high level of between-member interactions of the type required by research question. A summary of this and a brief overview of the method for stage one is provided below (Table 1, adapted from Dolan & Goodman, 2017).

Stage Method Steps
(**1) Entrée:**
Identifying the online community relevant to the research question. The online communication platforms Twitter and Instagram were selected to track the hashtag #IWANTNU, based on relevance to the research question, high 'traffic' and frequency of posting, detailed and descriptively rich data availability, and a range of between-member interactions.
(**2) Data Collection Part One: Field Notes:**
The researcher made field notes, incorporating a description, reflection and analysis of what was observed throughout the research process, including post immersion in the field reflective notes. (See Appendix A)
Data Collection Part Two: Capturing Screen Shots & Written Communications:
The written communications including images, videos and texts occurring between the university, their student consumers and between student consumer interactions on Twitter and Instagram were copied and pasted into a document, ready for further analysis.
(3) Data Classification:
The researcher classified messages as to whether they were primarily social or informational, and primarily on, or off topic e.g. related to university brand meaning
(4) Descriptive Coding:
The researcher read through the wealth of print outs from Twitter and Instagram related to the question and the hashtag, highlighting relevant material with brief comments. As a result of this read through, a preliminary range of descriptive codes were defined, for example as 'discussion regarding course selection' 'accommodation' 'university apparel'
(5) Interpretive Coding:
This process involved clustering descriptive codes into groups and interpreting the meaning of clusters in relation to the research question and objectives related to phase one research.
(6) Overarching Themes Identified:
The third stage of thematic analysis in netnography involves the identification of overarching themes. This involves deriving key themes for the data set as a whole, by assessing interpretive themes as related to the theoretical background and objectives of the study.

Table 1. An overview of the netnographic data collection steps followed for the first stage of the journey (adapted from Dolan & Goodman, 2017).

Indeed, for an adequate netnographic sampling strategy, this study gathers participants who are *"active, relevant, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich for the research question"* (Kozinets, 2010, p. 89). Therefore, the sample for this first study, although purposive in terms of the case focussed on, was anyone using or engaging with the hashtag #IWANTNU between the timeframe when the data collection took place (a 21 month period between January 2015 and October 2016 inclusive).

3.4.1.1 Entrée

Consistent with the suggestions made by Kozinets (2002b, 2015) entrée was guided by identifying the virtual community most relevant to the research question, a high traffic and frequency of posting and the availability of rich data. Twitter was chosen as the initial platform for data collection at the start of the prospective student journey for two reasons: 1. the university favoured it as its social media platform; 2. it had more followers than any other university social media account at the time and subsequently the most activity. Instagram was also included as the netnography study developed, due to Twitter's functionality capabilities it became extremely difficult to track conversations between users, as well as analyse image sharing content on Twitter, across platforms and across devices. The inclusion of Instagram also allowed for a more thorough approach, because the selected platforms satisfy the criteria, are relevant to the research questions, have a good number of recent and regular communications between heterogeneous participants, and offer detailed data.

As the analysis developed and data was collected across these two social media platforms, it became important to identify a feature that connected communications within and beyond the linked platforms (Chang & Chieng, 2006). This was achieved by tracking the university's #IWANTNU hashtag on their preferred social media platforms; this hashtag was branded by the university marketing team as the sole identifier of informational exchange online between the student consumer and the university regarding their application and pre-purchase journey. The use of the hashtag #IWANTNU enabled the tracking of a single user's communications on both platforms. The #IWANTNU hashtag became a unique tagging convention, which facilitated tracking and associated Twitter and Instagram posts between the university, the potential student, and back to the university more efficiently than searching full

texts for a related message (Chang & Chieng, 2006). Furthermore, by using the hashtag the potential student was revealing their recent, willing, and interactive participation in the communication process (Chang & Chieng, 2006; Kozinets, 2015). Therefore, accessing the messages identified by tracking the #IWANTNU hashtag provided an immediate insight into the potential meaning of the individual post, as well as assisting in identifying larger topics and emerging communicative themes (Smith & Smith, 2012). This hashtag was tracked for the duration (a 21 month period) of the first stage of the journey.

3.4.1.2 Data Collection

According to Kozinets (2002b, 2015), in netnography there are two important elements to data collection: (1) the data that the researcher directly copies from the computer-mediated communications of virtual community members, and (2) the data that the researcher inscribes regarding their observations of the community, its members, interactions and meanings. The data collection involved directly copying screenshots from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and observations of the community and its members, as well as the interactions and meanings of posts in relation to the hashtag. Screenshots of key moments and relevant online conversations and observations were stored in a password protected document, which formed an on-going diary/researcher reflections of online participant observation. This is the method of recording and understanding what is happening for participant observation. Saunders et al. (2009) highlighted that observations are often underused as data collection tools and will add a level of depth and richness to an individual's research data. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 289) wrote, *"if a research question and objectives are concerned with what people do, an obvious*

way in which to discover this is to watch them do it". As such, this reflexivity was used throughout the netnographic data collection to add richness to the account.

In summary, all individual postings associated with the hashtag #IWANTNU were observed and collected across two different social media platforms (Twitter and Instagram) for a 21 month period between January 2015 and October 2016. This time period aligned with the university marketing output and admissions journey of the 2016 prospective undergraduate student; it also allowed enough time for non-intrusive immersion into the virtual community as prescribed by Kozinets (2002b, 2015). Data was collected using three different devices, a smartphone, a tablet and a desktop PC, depending on whichever was the most convenient and accessible, using the platform and device functionality available between January 2015 and October 2016.

3.4.1.3 Data Analysis

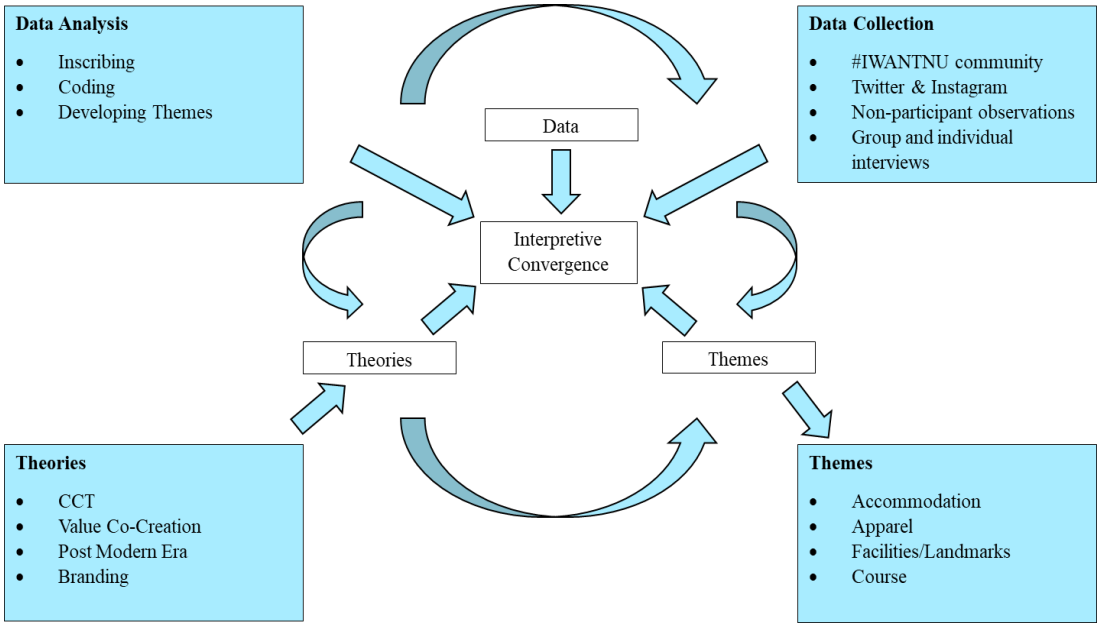
In line with the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this thesis it was important to be aware that the popular method of providing a quantification of the qualitative material collected online (through a content analysis) is just one mode of analysing netnographic data. This approach often foregrounds a procedural and reductionist emphasis. Therefore, without experience of the cultural context surrounding a particular site, topic, or individual, the netnographic interpretation suffers, becoming descriptive, decontextualized and a software-driven data mining approach that results in identifying more general patterns (Kozinets, 2015). Kozinets (2002a & b, 2015) recommends that the act and emphasis of the communication rather than the individual potential meaning becomes the focus of the analysis, thus, conversations were the data. Typically, with other qualitative modes of enquiry the research would initially textualise (Clifford, 1988, p. 38) the analysis into a transcript. However, as conversations already appeared in a text format that constituted the data,

transcribing was not required. Guided by the use of #IWANTNU, the initial open coding process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) was conducted by hand. Despite the large amount of multiple, complex and interrelated data (Kozinets, 2015) from the dual platform data collection, there were contextualisation benefits to coding by hand in this exploratory research (Kozinets, 2002; Saldana, 2015). For example, posts generated by hashtag users which were unrelated to the university and the pre-purchase journey or posts which were of an external promotional nature were discarded immediately. The remaining posts were then separated into those that were relevant to identity construction and loose association with the university brand, and those that were on other unrelated topics. Messages that were directly related to the research question were analysed further using axial and selective coding, breaking down the core themes which had initially emerged, and identifying final coded data categories.

In addition to the traditional coding approach, reflective field notes (Appendix A) were recorded (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) outlining the data collection and analysis processes. The intention was to record the netnographic journey from outside to inside, as well as documenting the learning of languages, rituals, sites, information, people and researcher involvement in a social web of meanings (Kozinets, 2015). This resulted in being immersed in the context of the research setting allowing judgement of which details were important and those that could be omitted, and thus extricating the significant findings from the participant observations. In addition to this, the supervisory team was used and challenged the interpretations of the observations, therefore the reflective field notes were intended to enable the researcher to explore the differences between individual interpretation of messages on Twitter and Instagram to ensure that coding and analysis was consistently robust and trustworthy,

an essential part of the process. The data was then subjected to a hermeneutic approach in which *"a part of the qualitative data (or text) is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the 'whole"* (Thompson, 1997 p. 433). This process was employed to understand the content of the meaning co-creation processes of the student consumers prior to purchase. As shown in Figure 11. Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter (2008) iterative process was adapted to analyse the data for the first stage of the student consumer journey using the hermeneutic framework of interpretation (Thompson, 1997) by retracing back and forth among the set of data, the discussions, and the extant literature and the interactions in the individual and collective posts. The hermeneutic framework provided an opportunity for interpreting student consumers' experiences prior to consumption/purchase as they interacted to create meaning that they constructed for their life-story (Thompson, 1997). Moreover, it is appropriate here to use hermeneutic interpretation as a framework for understanding the meaning co-creation process because, as Thompson (1997, p. 440) states, *"[this framework] is relevant to the phenomenological aspects of the person/culture relationship".*

Figure 11. Data Analysis Process for Stage One: Hermeneutic Framework adopted for this study (Adapted from Mathwick et al.'s 2008 iterative analysis process)



The nature of hermeneutical interpretation requires an iterative approach to meaning, what this implies is that posts were continuously re-read and categorised according to their themes, this was then retraced in order to satisfy the interpretive convergence (see Kozinets, 2002b; also see Figure 11). Hence, posts were re-read in order to gain an understanding of emerging brand meaning at this stage of the student consumer journey. Thompson (1997) suggests that this process contributes to an understanding of the entire data set. In this process, data were analysed by reading through posts and field notes on the #IWANTNU community and codes were assigned according to meaning frames. Once the researcher was satisfied with the series of identified themes that were consistent with the reflections of the informant each theme was confirmed (see Appendix A for visual representation of emerging themes). In this process, four

clear discussion points emerged from the hashtag conversations: accommodation, apparel, facilities and course. This revealed users' motivation to co-create the narrative in the hashtag community, as well as search for social networks. This also revealed that brand meaning was emerging through student consumer groups as a process; therefore, this process required further exploration.

In order to explore in detail the next stage of the student consumer journey, it was necessary to consider a method of inquiry, which was capable of accommodating direct access to the perceptions, values and beliefs of the student consumers and more complex social phenomena while retaining appreciation of contextual facets for exploring brand meaning in the HE environment. Therefore, it was decided that a focus group method was appropriate to achieve these research aims.

3.4.2 Collection of Data: Focus Groups – The Initial Consumption Stage

Even though some level of brand experience was demonstrated prior to enrolling, value in service organisations such as universities is co-constructed within interactions between the student consumers and other student consumers and the university brand. Therefore, to understand the initial consumption stage of the student consumer's journey an alternative mode of inquiry was sought, focus group interviews. This was because many researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002) suggest that face to face interviews enhance the significance of non-verbal communication and are useful in identifying where strong internal states are being emphasised. Furthermore, interviews can also be held in the context of a group and therefore, this process was adopted for the second study of this thesis, since it was considered to be the most effective method for talking to students, particularly as a greater number could be interviewed (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Moreover, Krueger and Casey (2000) argue that when working with young people a group presence can

encourage conversation, a view further supported by Coast and Horrocks (2007), who believe a focus group method can be cost effective in exploring prominent factors and drawing out core themes within a group of research respondents. This also provided an opportunity to check if the themes identified in the initial conversations from the pre-purchase journey remained significant to the students as they developed their enculturation journey.

The focus group environment provided a discussion that occurred between the participants and the group dynamic therefore produced informational insight that would not be found at this stage in individual interviews (Flick, 2006). This group dynamic was effective in demonstrating topics that were important to participants and where a common view was held (Bloor, Frankland, Robson, & Thomas, 2001). A further advantage of the focus group interviews was that focus groups not only allowed for more free-flowing conversations among participants within groups but also facilitated analysis that examined differences in perspective between groups (Krueger & Casey, 2014). It is important to acknowledge at this stage that the focus groups only explored sport students' perceptions. The rationale for the sample was that at the time of data collection, sport was a visible part of the university's promotional strategy (see section 3.4.2.2 for further detail).

3.4.2.1 Recruitment of Focus Group Participants.

Participants were selected based on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, were within an age-range, had similar socio-characteristics such as education level/course, links to sport and were comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). Likewise, Krueger (1994) believes rich data can only be generated if individuals in the group are prepared to engage fully in the discussion and, for this reason, promotes the use of a homogenous group. Based

on the topic under investigation Krueger (1994) suggests that participants should share similar characteristics such as age-range, education and social class background, this was considered throughout the recruitment stage.

An additional consideration was the size of the focus group. The size of a focus group was important as *"the group must be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights, yet large enough to provide diversity of opinions"* (Murdaugh, Russell, & Sowell, 2000, p. 1509). The number generally suggested by researchers (Burns & Bush, 2010; Krueger & Casey, 2000) as being manageable is between six and ten participants; large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented. Burns and Bush (2010) suggest this is because focus groups incorporating between four and six people are better suited to eliciting information about specific issues on a variety of levels. In addition to this, several authors, including Krueger (1994), suggest that for a simple research question the number of focus groups necessary may only be three or four. Therefore, the current study considered previous researcher suggestions to maximise focus group success. This included recruitment of participants with shared/similar characteristics, the number of focus groups to include as well as the size of those groups.

3.4.2.2 Data collection – Part One

Recruitment for the study was undertaken with the target sample in a department in the university where the researcher lectures. This assisted with satisfying the participant criteria for the study, which was either with university student athletes currently playing for a university sport team and/or with students currently studying sport, who may or may not have been part of a university sport team. There were two purposes for these criteria. First, and perhaps the most important in terms of exploring students' brand meaning making, was that at the time of data collection, university

sport was a visible part of the university's promotional strategy and identity as an institution. This was demonstrated through a wealth of university sport promotional messages both online and offline (see post in Appendix E) and therefore this was part of the meaning making that would be expected to be co-created. A second advantage of focussing this study on sports students was that previous studies (Gayles & Hu, 2009) have shown that engagement with all aspects of university life tends to be higher in sports students. An advantage of this therefore was higher levels of interaction and higher levels of engagement with the university, including marketing activity. Furthermore, it has also been established in a previous study (Donnelly & Young, 1988) that sporting individuals demonstrated a far more deliberate act of identity construction when learning to adopt values and perspectives of a new group. This was considered in the sample criteria because identity construction was vital to understanding student consumers' brand meaning making across their socialisation journey.

The recruitment process commenced within the first two weeks of semester one, of the students beginning their time at university, this was because the researcher wanted to capture the participants' initial experiences at the start of their consumption journey, before they had time to fully settle into the experience. This initial capture was important for exploring the student consumers' preconceptions of their experience with the brand to understand whether early conceptions developed during the pre-consumption stage were accurate. Hence, this needed to take place before the student consumers had regular direct brand experiences with the university and other students where they started to learn to adopt the values and perspectives in order to socialise.

Course	Age	Gender	Level of study
Sport Management x 24 Sport Coaching x 30	18-24	Mixed	Level 4 – First year Undergraduate students.

Table 2. Summary of sample recruited for the focus groups and second stage of the journey.

The data collection process began with the completion of a profiling questionnaire (see Appendix B1) the purpose of this was to generate a profile of the characteristics of the sample (Rowley, 2014). Therefore, the questionnaire was used as a promotional tool to begin dialogue and profile for focus group interviews, as such, the data collected via the questionnaires was not analysed or used beyond the scope of this objective. One hundred and ninety five questionnaires were completed. Using the information provided in the questionnaire ensured that members of the sample population met the inclusion criteria which was a university sport student (defined as either playing for a university sport team or studying on one the university sport degree programmes) and could be defined as purposively selected for the focus group.

An introductory lecture was used to collect data, which spanned across three different sport related degree programmes to promote the study. Recruitment occurred during the first lecture of a professional skills module lecture in teaching week one, semester one (September 2016). Volunteers were asked to complete a short promotional questionnaire, at the end of the questionnaire there was a section where the participants provided an email address if they were interested in the area and would like to discuss the topic further in the form of a focus group. Participants who provided their email were contacted by the researcher and asked if they would like to take part in a focus group (Table 2 illustrates a summary of sample recruited for the focus groups and second stage of the journey).

3.4.2.3 Data collection – Part Two

The focus group interviews (see Appendix B2) were constructed to explore key themes within the research area, these themes were previously identified through a review of extant literature, along with findings that emerged from the first study, pre-consumption. Each focus group discussion had six parts; university sport, social media usage, informational exchange with the university and others, identity, student consumer journey so far, the university brand, brand meaning and co-creation. These included questions such as 'why did you choose the university', 'what is your perception of the university', 'describe your journey as a student so far'. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured approach. In the first part, introductory information was provided, and the aim of the focus group was explained. Questions were open-ended and were all broadly related to exploring the in-depth accounts of student consumer identity constructions and the influence on university brand meaning co-creation. The student consumers' answers provided information regarding their frequency of participation of marketing messages, brand awareness, and service categories consumed, as well as sections that explored their student consumer journey, their identity as a result of this journey and a discussion on the impact of sport.

The focus group interviews emerged as beneficial for enriching the data obtained throughout participant observations online (pre-consumption stage) as the researcher had the opportunity to ask students to explain, confirm, contradict, defend, or expand upon the interpretation of the events, which had been observed by the researcher within the online environment. This was completed in part by using a reader response style of questioning, which showed the participants archived data from the #IWANTNU community. Specific posts (see Appendix B4) emerged relating to the student consumers' brand meaning making at the pre-consumption stage, were

produced and participants were asked to comment on what they thought of the posts. Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2015) claim that questions should not be so precise that different lines of inquiry cannot be followed up during interview data collection. Therefore, due to the semi-structured nature of the focus group interviews, research questions were modified accordingly *"to represent what the people you interviewed told you, in response not just to the questions you asked them but the purpose of the research"* (Gillham, 2005, p. 163).

The focus group interview process started shortly after the completion of the profiling questionnaire. A pilot study was conducted on the first focus group. There were a couple of minor changes to wording and interview question structure was altered as a result of this, but as the changes were not significant it was decided that this focus group pilot would become part of the data collection. A participant sample of 54 individuals (see Table 2) from the university of focus in the case study of this thesis made up a total of nine focus group discussions, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes per focus group. All focus groups commenced with an ethics briefing providing the participants with more information on the study and the opportunity to opt out if they wished to do so, consent forms (see Appendix B3) were signed post introductory discussions. Most focus group interviews were limited to six participants to allow for interpreting data from a limited sample that represented a full spectrum of experiences and opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). All focus group interviews were conducted on university grounds and within a classroom environment, in order to ensure participants felt comfortable discussing their experiences so far. The purpose of the classroom environment was to replicate a seminar style session, it was hoped by doing this the participants would not feel uncomfortable talking in an unnatural focus group setting, as the context was just another informal teaching style session.

Digital recordings were made and researcher field notes (see Appendix B5) were supplementary throughout the discussions, along with reflective notes at the end of each data collection session to observe non-verbal interactions. Although most researchers (Krueger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Rabiee, 2004) suggest that a note taker should be present during focus group discussions, the nature and environment of the discussion did not permit this. However, the researcher was prepared for this before commencing focus group discussions and therefore structured the sessions in such a way to make time for appropriate note taking without interference in the flow of discussions. Note taking focused on: the impact of the group dynamic, documenting exchanges of views and the general content of discussion. The purpose was to note which statement was made by which particular individual, thereby complementing the oral information and enabling a fuller analysis of the data (Kitzinger, 1995; Kitzinger, & Barbour, 1999). Furthermore, diagrams of participant placement were developed at the start of the focus groups to assist with identifying specific speakers in the analysis (see Appendix B5). In addition to this, all focus group interviews were voice recorded and notes were made to accompany the recordings. The timeframe of focus group discussions was the 30th of September 2016 - 11th of October 2016. Focus group discussions were brought to a close when data saturation for the study was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, & Tisdell, 2015).

3.4.2.4 Stages of Data Analysis

In qualitative research there are numerous data analysis methods that provide identification of patterns or themes, however, most of them are tied to specific epistemological and theoretical positions. In contrast, thematic analysis is seen as a flexible method of analysis that is independent of theory and epistemology, therefore *"it can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches"*

(Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 78). One of the advantages of thematic analysis for this thesis was that it provided a set of analysis skills that can be commonly shared among a variety of qualitative analysis methods (Holloway & Todres, 2003) such as the focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

The framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis (Table 3), served as the basis for the analysis process employed in the present study.

Phase		Description of the process	Iterative process throughout analysis
1	Familiarising with the data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. Import data into Nvivo data management tool	Assigning data to refined concepts to illustrate meaning at the individual and collective level.
2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code	Refining and distilling abstract concepts used by the student consumers.
3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	Re-ordering, coding and annotating through NVivo, using mind maps to assist with a visual of the data, as well as the researcher fieldnotes.
4	Reviewing themes	Checking the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic map of the analysis	Assigning data to refined concepts to illustrate meaning in the mediated and lived experiences described by the student consumers.
5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	Explanatory accounts, extrapolating deeper meaning, drafting summary statements and analytical memos through NVivo. Assigning meaning, generating themes and concepts as well as exploring the inherent contradictions in behaviour and descriptions.
6	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.	Synthesising all NVivo analytical memos and researcher fieldnotes gathered throughout data collection. Visuals collated through hierarchy charts and mind maps were useful for representations of data at this stage.

Table 3. Braun and Clarke (2006) adapted framework for thematic analysis

The following section describes in detail how the above framework was employed in the data analysis process of the present study.

1. Familiarisation with Data

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, notes were also taken during the interviews, which were affixed to each of the transcript Word documents. This was for simplicity of reference when cross-checking the audio files and re-

reading the transcripts to guarantee the conversations were accurately heard and transcribed. It also helped to minimise overlooking the identification of vital points, such as non-verbal behaviour observations.

The first analytical stage objective was immersion in the data and engagement with the data, therefore focus at this stage was concerned with a thorough initial reading of the data and conversations in the transcripts. The qualitative data analysis package NVivo was deployed to support the stages of coding, theme review, theme refinement and development of analysis, through tying together notes and annotations to coded text. It is important to highlight that NVivo software is merely a facilitation tool and therefore cannot offer the necessary level of academic interpretation that a researcher is required to undertake (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A second and third robust re-reading, searching for meanings and patterns, aided the initiation of notes and memos (an NVivo function that enables the researcher to record their ideas, insights, interpretations and growing understanding of the study), written manually to start with, as notes in preparation for the creation of nodes (codes) in NVivo. This stage also included returning back to both the audio files and the notes written during the focus group interviews, in order to verify accuracy, consistency and reliability of transcription.

2. Generating Initial Codes

It is important to highlight that the process of coding is influenced by individual filters regarding perception, documentation and coding data (Saldana, 2015). The process in the current study involved categorising interpretation, combined with personal implicit knowledge and intuition to establish what the data looked and felt like when grouping together (Guba, & Lincoln, 1994). The epistemological stance taken was identified

from inception, in order to make clear the lens that could be applied in response to the data (Saldana, 2015).

Although a number of scholars use the terms code and category interchangeably, this study adopts Saldana's (2015) view that codes facilitate the development of categories, that is *"a word or phrase describing some segment of your data that is explicit"* (Rossman & Rallis 2003, p. 282). Coding requires the researcher to "wear" an analytic lens, it is the lens' filter that each individual researcher adopts that influences how data is understood and interpreted (Saldana, 2015). Initial coding applies to the data a predefined list of codes that can be based on extant literature review, the conceptual framework, the research questions, or even the researcher's stock of previous experience and knowledge (Miles & Huberman 1994; Saldana 2015). For the present study, one of the research questions was related to 'why the student consumers chose the university'. The initial codes this generated in NVivo are displayed (see Appendix D2 NVivo Figure 1). For clarity, as these terms are used interchangeably, in NVivo codes are labelled as nodes e.g. a collection of references about a specific theme or case, the researcher gathers the references by 'coding' sources to a node. The original number of nodes (NVivo's version of codes) in Phase 2 of the process of coding for the focus group transcripts (the initial generation of codes) totalled 237. NVivo's functionality allows the researcher to make notes of these initial codes as the analysis journey progresses, therefore, a high-level description (see Appendix D2 NVivo Figure 1) was written to define the node (code) title for purposes of clarification, transparency and tracking objectives.

3. Searching and Reviewing the Themes

Following the development of the initial codes, the next step in the analysis process was Phase 3, which involved searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the researcher's analytical reflection, the searching for themes process (see Appendix D2 NVivo Figure 2) involved organising and collating codes, code descriptors and researcher field notes into potential themes. A theme can be described as *"a phrase or sentence describing more subtle and tacit processes"*. (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 282).

Saldana (2015) states that both the search for patterns and the process of reaching theory is more complex and chaotic than some espoused thematic linear processes appear. This was demonstrated in the current study where even though the presentation of these stages appears linear, in fact an iterative approach (see Figure 12 hermeneutic spiral) was required and therefore was adopted to embrace the messy data. The reality was that even when the researcher arrived at their final themes, they continuously returned to previous sections such as searching for themes to make modifications and enhance rigour. In addition to this, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that the search for themes can be facilitated with some sort of visual representation such as tables or mind maps. This study employed the various visual functions of NVivo software in order to facilitate the process of searching for themes process (see Appendix D2 visual hierarchy charts).

4. Refinement of Codes

A further reading of the data resulted in a review of the existing nodes (codes) and refinement into categories. Refinement of the codes into categories was centred on Hatch's (2002) suggestion that categories, patterns or themes may be characterised by:

• Similarity (things happen the same way)

• Difference (they happen in predictably different ways)

• Frequency (they happen seldom or often)

• Correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events)

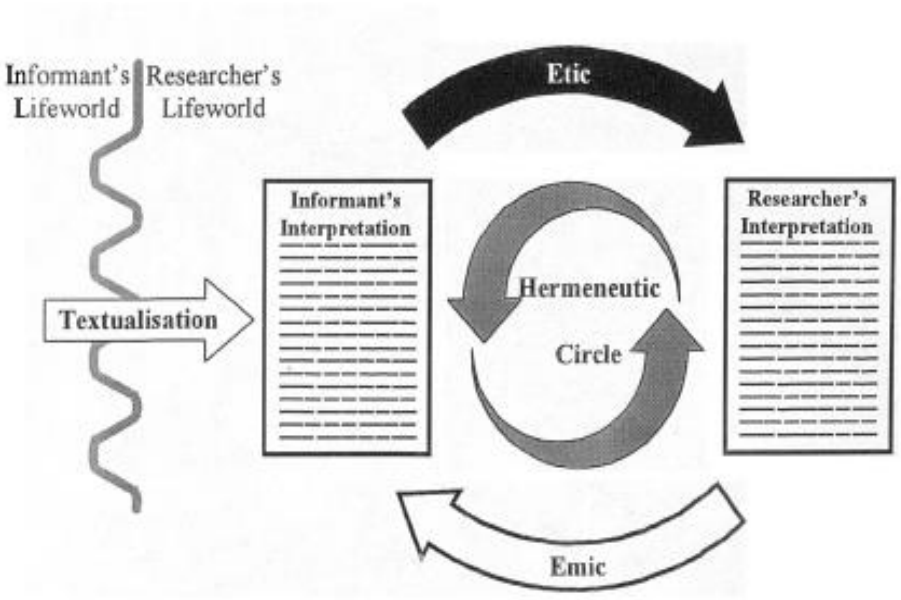
• Causation (one appears to cause another)

It was at this stage where some nodes/codes were discarded as not deemed valuable or relevant to the focus of the research question, for example 'life without sport impact on identity' and 'functionality of social media platforms' were removed. This was because these initial codes generated limited rich discussion on brand meaning and therefore after further exploration a great many of responses were closed answers. Other codes, e.g. apparel, emerged as more valuable for discussion on brand meaning. This process involved continuous cycles between codes, categories and themes to the transcript, the audio files, to the high level of description assigned to the nodes (see Appendix D2 NVivo Figure 3), the field notes and the visual maps. Data excerpts were reviewed continually in relation to the new-found categories and themes. During the process of reviewing the themes, themes were inspected for internal homogeneity by reading all coded data extracts that belong to each theme, and for external homogeneity by examining the existence of adequate differentiation among themes (Patton, 2002). What this means is that codes were ultimately verified for mutual exclusivity i.e. should not have the same data extract in more than one category (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, the internal and external homogeneity check required that a number of data extracts had to move to other themes, or even had to be disregarded from the analysis. The use of visuals from NVivo's software such as hierarchy charts and mind mapping (see Appendix D2) proved valuable at this stage, allowing the analysis of the themes through visual representations. This process also

involved a continuous shift between collating codes, code descriptors and researcher field notes into potential themes. The entire data set was read and re-read several times for this purpose. Additional data extracts that were left un-coded during the coding process were ascertained and were coded, or even re-coded to fit into other themes. These amendments to the additional coding proved that coding is an on-going, iterative process that is not merely confined to phase two (generation of initial codes) of the thematic process.

In line with the philosophical underpinning of this thesis, that is an interpretive paradigm, it was important that this iterative approach continued throughout the coding process to assist interpretation. This emphasis on interpretation manifests itself within the interpretive paradigm in the form of the hermeneutic spiral (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 63; Thompson et al., 1994) which can be expressed in a series of different steps (Figure 12).

Figure 12: The Hermeneutic Spiral (Ritson, 1996)



To briefly summarise the hermeneutic framework and its application to the present study, just like the initial phase of coding (see NVivo Figure 1 Appendix D2), the first step was to 'mark out' in interpretive terms the phenomena to be explored, this process was achieved through textualisation (Ricoeur,1974) (see initial coding section). Second, the interpreter approached this text from an emic perspective (Geertz, 1973), through enhancing their own understanding by seeing *"the phenomena in its own terms"* (Hirschman, 1986, p. 245). The next step in the interpretive process was to move between the texts of the participants (viewed through the emic perspective) and the theoretical interpretation of the phenomena that was forming in the researcher's mind. In order to do this the researcher adopted an etic perspective (Pike, 1954) in which they connected the interpretations of the focus group participants with the theoretical knowledge pertaining to the phenomena under exploration. Therefore, the hermeneutic framework was employed in this particular study, as a form of third level analysis, to re-examine the reinterpreted codes and develop understanding of the phenomena's role in the lifeworld of the participants and the theoretical (etic) understanding of its place within the conceptual interpretation of the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). What this meant in practice was the interpretation of the findings demonstrated that aspects of brand meaning began to emerge at this stage and this was identifiable through exploring student consumers' identity construction. Although Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that searching for themes and reviewing themes are two distinct stages, the nature in which the focus groups were analysed to ensure the study benefited from the exploring of in-group negotiations and between group negotiations meant that these two stages merged in the coding process.

5. Emergent Themes for Discussion

A final refinement of the themes was undertaken, through a further hermeneutic exploration of the existing themes, this included the further amalgamation of some of the categories and themes using the child and parent node functionality on NVivo, this resulted in the transformation of the focus group key themes (see Appendix D2 NVivo Figure 3). The generation of these themes relates directly to the research question of understanding brand meaning at this stage of the student journey. That is, at the purchase stage of the journey establishing social networks was more of a priority for the student consumers than co-creating brand meaning. Student consumers used the university sport sub-brand community to construct a desired identity to shape their brand experience. The focus group data produced some rich insight into student consumers' initial brand experiences namely the intermediating role of the student consumers and their tribes in shaping the brand experience, however, it was still not clear whether the university had a clear brand meaning at this stage, therefore a further exploration of the journey was required.

3.4.3 Collection of Data: Semi-structured Interviews – The Established Consumption Stage.

Notably, interviews permit the researcher to gain knowledge of phenomena that are not purely observable and enable the researcher to develop an understanding of the interviewee's perspective (Patton, 1987). Furthermore, the use of interviews is justified when informants have insight to offer as a consequence of their position (Denscombe, 2008). Therefore, in the established consumption stage (third study) of the student consumer journey, interviews enabled the participants to make explicit their individual thoughts on university brand meaning and offer insight as a consequence of their position on this journey. A semi-structured approach was adopted

again for this study, this enabled a focus on the areas of interest while at the same time omitting questions not relevant to particular respondents. Therefore, the interview questions for the final stage of the student consumer journey ensured interesting lines of inquiry could be pursued within interviews and as they progressed. Bryman and Bell (2015) also stress that the researcher needs to be certain about what needs investigating to ensure that the research questions are addressed. This was a pivotal point at this stage of the student consumer journey, because the two studies which had preceded this stage revealed that perceptions are individual, but are socially informed and, therefore, a further study was needed to answer the question regarding how student consumers co-create brand meaning in the HE environment.

3.4.3.1 Recruitment

As previously discussed, this study adopted a semi-structured approach to interviewing, this section outlines the processes involved in data collection, specifically related to sample and the interview research tools. Although the sampling was that of purposive snowballing in line with the overall research question, a different sample group was employed for this third study. This was because the ability to gain a variety of perspectives from participants knowledgeable on phenomena was of vital importance for the third study. Therefore, it was important that the sample moved beyond the scope of sports students in order to test the strength of the university as a brand more generally throughout the wider university. Consequently, four sample groups were identified: students who study a sport related degree programme and play university sport; students who only study a sport related degree programme, but do not play university sport; students who play university sport but do not study sport and finally; students who do not play university sport or study a sport related degree programme. The ability to gain a variety of perspectives was facilitated by this sample

selection. The justification for this approach was that in order to explore the notion of the sport strategy the university was adopting at the time of data collection fully, perspectives of those students who did not study or play sport were vital to understanding university brand meaning. This is because those students who were involved in sport to some capacity were clearly exposed on a regular basis to certain cues and stimuli that influenced their meaning co-creation, however, the students who were not exposed to this as frequently would provide a different experience of the student consumer journey and brand meaning. While respondents differed with regard to courses studied and whether they play university sport, they all exhibited commonality in their remit to respond to questions on brand meaning within the university environment. A well attended (100 + students) first year undergraduate lecture was used again to recruit participants for the third study. Volunteers were asked to complete a short promotional questionnaire (see Appendix C1) and at the end of the questionnaire there was a section where the participants provided an email address if they were interested in the area and would like to discuss the topic further.

Participant	Course	Gender	Currently part of university sport?	Level of study
A	Sport Management	M	N	First year undergraduate.
B	Computer Science	F	Y	First year undergraduate.
CA	International Business with Spanish	F	N	First year undergraduate.
CO	Sport Management	M	N	First year undergraduate.
E	Law	F	Y	First year undergraduate.
JA	Sport Management	F	Y	First year undergraduate.
JO	Sport Management	M	N	First year undergraduate.
K	Sport Management	M	Y	First year undergraduate.
M	Sport Management	F	Y	First year undergraduate.
T	Business with Marketing Management	F	N	First year undergraduate.

Table 4. Summary of sample recruited for the semi-structured interviews and third stage of the journey.

3.4.3.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews provided an in depth understanding of brand co-creation, to assist and identification of when a brand becomes a brand on the student consumer journey within the English HE sector and what is the brand that is being co-created by the students. Building on the first and second stages of the journey analysis, the researcher directed inquiry towards the most relevant areas in the interviews. Therefore, prior knowledge served to inform the development of the interview schedule; the following section discusses the construction of this and the subsequent conduct of the semi-structured interviews.

In order to achieve the objectives of the third stage, a method of questioning was required which would ensure respondents focused on concrete examples, grounded in real-life experiences (e.g. 'describe an example of what you perceive to be good or bad marketing'), rather than focusing on abstract generalities, which has been a criticism of interviews from previous research (Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, a detailed interview guide was developed (Bryman & Bell, 2015) employing the researcher questions as the basis of the framework, open-ended questions were incorporated under each of the section headings. The interview schedule (see Appendix C2) was designed to provide an immediacy of rich data, based around five broad themes, each of which was guided by theory, extant literature and the previous two studies that comprised the student consumer journey, these included:

- Capturing the student consumer journey
- Identity construction
- University sport/University generic branded clothing
- Sources of information and marketing
- Brand meaning.

Throughout the first phase of the interview, the interviewees were prompted to describe their student journey. The enculturation processes and the stages of the consumer journey literature (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Kleine & Kleine, 2000; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) have suggested that brands in contemporary consumer society possess multiple layers of meaning, and therefore individuals construct differentiable identities within the context of multiple social realities and across a journey. Therefore, it was important to explore students' perceptions of their journey as well as their perceptions relating to any developments or changes they had made to

their identity as part of this enculturation process. The next phase of interview themes explored student consumer responses to specific brand experiences and university branded apparel. The purpose of this specific section was to explore what the previous literature and the findings from the first two studies had suggested about using direct brand experiences and apparel to construct a desired identity to assist the enculturation process. More specifically as Kleine & Kleine (2000) found in their study that apparel was used for the construction of an authentic identity and relied on co-created meanings, which were perceived to be authentic by other members of the subculture. This revealed where some students were potentially identifying with the brand, using its shared meaning to construct an identity. Following this, student consumers were probed about their interpretations of marketing and asked to provide examples to demonstrate their knowledge of university branding activity. This question was used to establish student consumers' understanding of marketing more generally and then HE marketing more specifically. A range of questions was immediately asked to explore the interviewees' brand awareness, as well as the strategies/sources of information that helped them co-create this, such as 'in the past few months where have you seen or heard about Northumbria as a brand' 'is it a brand' 'what is the brand' and 'what is the unique selling point'. Generally, most of the questions were asked in a similar style, and in a similar order (Bryman & Bell, 2007), unless participants initiated topics before the researcher had a chance to introduce them, which occurred on occasion. Other questions were used/altered for clarification purposes, for instance the association of the brand with the logo required the interview questions to be adjusted at times to elicit the required information and determine whether the participants knew what the brand was when the terminology was removed (see logo question 33 in interview schedule, Appendix C2).

The interview guide adopted a similar approach to that of Gillham (2005), which included opening, middle and closure stages. The opening stages included 'easy' questions, which allowed the participants to settle into the interviews and feel at ease with the typical unnatural setting that is one-to-one interviews. These included 'how did you feel about starting your degree?' and 'what sports or activities were you involved in at the start?'. The questions then progressed in complexity e.g., 'can you explain what marketing means to you?' and 'when I mention Northumbria University the brand, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?'. The interviews concluded with the participants having the opportunity to provide their thoughts on anything that had not been covered, thereby mitigating the risk of failing to address issues of relevance to the case being studied (Sobh & Perry, 2006). By employing this technique, interview respondents could communicate rich and detailed accounts of the phenomenon being studied.

One of the advantages of this style of open-ended questions was the provision of wide-ranging and developmental answers (Saunders et al., 2009) which allowed the researcher much more depth (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Another particular benefit was the opportunity to go into more depth where appropriate and clear up any misunderstandings (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Cohen et al., 2002). This was sometimes an issue with the focus group discussions when individual conversations were taking place separate to the general group discussion. Therefore, attempts were made wherever possible to ensure this opportunity was presented throughout all the interviews for the third study. The interview guide also included suggested probing questions. Probing questions were used when the researcher either misunderstood an answer or where particular areas of interest emerged (Saunders et al., 2009) such as when one of the respondents talked very passionately about a marketing campaign

they had been exposed to recently, probes were used to understand further how meaning was generated for that particular advertisement.

Prior to implementing the data collection process, the research tools were piloted to ensure that they provided credible data and thus enhanced the research design, conceptualisation, and interpretation of findings (Kezar, 2000). The aim of the pilot interview was to test the interview schedule. The pilot study was conducted on a university student who had studied sport and played sport. The pilot interview highlighted some issues with the interview schedule that needed to be addressed. For example, questions relating to identity construction emerged as problematic for the participant, therefore specific attention on this section ensured that certain questions were modified to reduce complexity and enhance clarity. Changes to wording, sentence structure and question structure took place after the pilot interview, therefore the pilot interview was not included in the final data collection for analysis because of the many interruptions to the recording of the interview.

Data collection commenced by making contact via email with potential participants who met the study's inclusion criterion. A purposive snowball sampling technique was instigated halfway through this study in order for the researcher to interview students from different courses and different faculties. The researcher on occasion relied upon already recruited participants to assist with this. Interviews were arranged at a time convenient for the interviewees, on average, the interviews took approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes. Excluding the pilot interview, all interviews took place on university grounds, either in a classroom setting or in a pre-booked room in the university library. Ethical considerations were discussed with the participants and informed consent forms signed (see Appendix C3). Data saturation emerged at 10 participants, these informants were interviewed between April 2018 - June 2018,

which was the end of the second semester of the participant's first full academic university year. This allowed participants time to settle into university life, providing enough experiences from the first year, in order for them to draw on rich examples to respond to questions relating to brand experience and meaning. Following the interview, the interviewees were provided with a debriefing, and allowed the opportunity to ask any questions they had. When the interviewees were made fully aware of the study's thesis, during the interview debrief, many of the participants offered more information and clarification of their answers. Many of these impromptu conversations encouraged the interviewees to provide less ambiguous irreverent responses to university brand meaning, which they had alluded to during the semi-structured interview; all of the additional information was recorded in a research diary and helped to authenticate and clarify a number of inferences made in the semi-structured interviews.

All of the participants agreed to be digitally recorded (Saunders et al., 2009) and field notes (see Appendix C4) were also taken during and immediately post interviews so as to record specific terms or words expressed and body language (Bryman & Bell, 2007). These were written up as soon as possible after the interviews.

3.4.3.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Typically, there is no rigid separation between data collection and analysis, the process is an iterative cycle of data collection and analysis, with the intention that throughout the research process the results of the analysis will help guide subsequent collection of data. However, as advised by Spiggle (1994), Wolcott (2001), and Banister and Hogg's (2003) qualitative analysis frameworks, this study treated analysis and interpretation as two distinct concepts. This is because according to Spiggle (1994), analysis manipulates data into a manageable size, whereas interpretation makes sense

of the data through *"emergent, holistic, extralogical insight or understanding"* (p. 497).

Similar to the focus groups in the second stage of the journey, the data for the third study was analysed using NVivo through a thematic analysis and the hermeneutic framework of interpretation (Thompson, 1997). The hermeneutic approach proved vital again at this stage as it allowed a retracing back and forth among the set of data (all three studies individually, then combined), the conversations, and the literature including individual and collective meanings from all three studies. Furthermore, the hermeneutic framework provided an opportunity for the research to interpret consumers' consumption experiences in HE as they relate to their everyday lives, self-construction, and meaning that they construct for their life-story (Thompson, 1997), something that was not so easily captured in the focus group setting but equally emerged as an important finding. Clearly, hermeneutic interpretation cannot be done within a single read (Thompson, 1997). It required an iterative process, meaning that text was continuously re-read, categorised according to themes, and retraced in order to satisfy the interpretive convergence (Kozinets, 2002a & b) (see hermeneutic framework Figure 11 & Figure 12).

3.4.3.4 Overview of analysis stages

Analysis followed the same steps as Stage Two (the focus group analysis) through the adoption of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. This included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and emergent themes. NVivo 12 was once again employed to assist the stages of coding. It must be further highlighted that NVivo is limited to providing software that supports the management and organization of data and the coding process; therefore, the coding process was still dependent on the interpretive skills of the

researcher. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, this was combined with the researcher field notes created during the interviews. Immersion in the data required multiple readings of the transcripts, as a result the preparation of codes for the NVivo document was created for the next stage of the analysis. The initial codes generated in Phase 2 of the thematic analysis framework for the third study are illustrated in NVivo Figure 4 (Appendix D3).

NVivo's functionality allowed for the making of notes of these initial codes as the analysis journey progressed, therefore, a high-level description (see Appendix D3 NVivo Figure 5) was written to define the node title for purposes of clarification, transparency and tracking techniques. Following the development of the initial codes, the next step in the analysis process was Phase 3 (see Appendix D3 NVivo Figure 6), which involved searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The hermeneutic spiral was employed again, to re-examine the reinterpreted codes (see Appendix D3 NVivo Figure 7). A final refinement of the themes took place, through a further hermeneutic exploration of the existing themes, which included the further merging of some of the categories and themes using the child and parent node functionality on NVivo, this resulted in the transformation of the semi-structured interview themes (see Appendix D3 NVivo Figure 8) below**.** A further refinement produced the final themes which emerged from Stage Three in (see Appendix D3 NVivo Figure 9) below. The generation of the themes which include: the evolving role of the sub-brand community in the process of brand meaning; the influence of the lived experiences in shaping brand meaning and shattering modernist structures; and the influence of individual and collective meanings on emerging awareness, relate directly to the research question. These themes are fully explored in the findings and discussion chapters.

3.4.3.5 Contextualising Student Consumer Responses

An important part of the interviews was to extrapolate relevant aspects of interaction from the student consumers into meaningful 'real' context. The ability of the student consumers to recall brand specific information was an important part of this stage. Because of this, recollections of any examples of what the student consumers considered marketing were sought (see Table 5) initially, before advancing to specific university related marketing activity. This proved central in developing an account of the social context in which this activity occurred, since these accounts had to relate as closely as possible to the actual events they described. Adopting Denzin's (1989, p. 84) useful description, it was essential to ensure that the descriptions which emerged from these interviews were *"valid experiential statements"*. An additional purpose was to further probe some of the vague responses reported from the second stage of the journey in some focus groups. One way of ensuring those *"valid experiential statements"* as described by Denzin (1989, p. 84), was to constantly 'ground' the responses of the student consumers in a particular experiential example of the phenomenon being described. Thus, rather than relying on generic accounts of a participant's behaviour ("Oh yeah. I see ads for the university all the time"), participants were asked to recall particular examples with as much detail as possible e.g. *"the one that came straight into my head then was Ikea. Have you seen the ghost dancing advert that's on TV at the minute?"* (M). Locating the answer within a specific experiential context ensured two methodological criteria were met. First, it ensured that the participants were not simply agreeing with the researcher and giving vague answers that did not reflect their actual behaviour and interpretations. Second, these examples also provided the necessary level of detail which would later support the interpretation of these accounts and the development of "cultural themes" (Spradley,

1980) and a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) in relation to their perceptions of brand meaning.

Participants	Response when asked to recall good or bad marketing examples
CA	*"I was just going to say Nike, I think. Everyone knows what it is. It's got a recognisable logo".*
E	*"Technically for girls, the most branded things don't have the brand on them at all. All Saints, you don't really see the logo".*
JA	*"I mean I think Louis Vuitton stands out, it's got the pattern, you know the colours, the brown typical pattern of it. And I think it's just something that's so recognisable, like it's been going on for so long".*
M	*"Obviously the logo is like, it's Nike, isn't it"?*

Table 5: Illustration of some of the participants' marketing examples.

This section has outlined the research methods used to collect data across the student journey. In order to make sense of the brand meaning process a consideration of the three separate studies together was required.

3.5 Representation of Findings for the Case Study – Bringing Together the Three Stages

The research design of this thesis required an exploration across a journey within a case study, this resulted in three studies emerging from the journey which were analysed separately and then as a whole. This was achieved by considering each study throughout the analysis and building up a complex picture of emerging brand awareness and brand meaning at the different stages. Furthermore, shifting observation between different analytical units is crucial to a case study where the part and the whole are to be considered together in a hermeneutic circle (Forster, 2007). Essentially, the journey began by analysing the netnographic data, which was collected via online interactions on prospective students and focused on exploring

their pre-consumption experiences and perceptions of the university brand. The findings at this stage demonstrated that brand meaning was emerging as a process via student consumer groups, therefore, a second study on the consumption journey was required in order to explore initial brand meanings further. The second stage of the journey explored initial direct experiences with the university brand, which was when the students arrived on campus within the first four weeks of their first semester in their first year. The focus group findings at this stage provided further insight into the student consumer journey, their awareness and interpretations of the brand at this stage. However, findings at this stage could not fully answer the research question 'when does brand meaning emerge in the university environment and what is the brand the student consumers are buying into?'. Therefore, a third study was required to explore the brand meaning process further along the consumption journey. This was completed at the end of the student consumers' first year and the findings at this stage identified that there were diverse responses to brand meaning in the HE environment, some student consumers co-created a clear and explicit meaning for the brand through identity construction using the consumer groups, others demonstrated examples of implicit brand meaning. By using this research design, it became clear that brand meaning was emerging as a process and that postmodern consumer culture in HE brands is shaped by co-creative and experiential nature of brand meanings and identity.

3.6 Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability

Research quality is reliant upon the degree of consideration given to issues of validity and reliability (Healy & Perry, 2000; Yin, 2009) and in order to demonstrate credible results, a persuasive weight of evidence was required and an agreement between experienced others was essential. Guba and Lincoln (1984) suggest that notions of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability should replace terms like

replicability and generalisability for researchers undertaking qualitative exploration. For research to be considered trustworthy, and capable of making a contribution to academic knowledge, it must conform to standards established within its own ontological and epistemological framework. Remenyi, Williams, Money and Swartz, (1998) contend that the well-established and commonly used methods to establish the quality of case study research proposed by Yin (2009) are fundamentally positivist in nature. Moreover, Healy and Perry (2000) argue that because a paradigm constitutes a worldview encompassing ontology, epistemology and methodology, the quality of research has to be judged within the terms of its own paradigm. This section will consider both internal validity (that the findings were appropriately supported by data) and external validity (in terms of the possibility of where further research of a similar kind may provide supporting evidence for the interpretations offered from this case) and will respond to these concerns.

3.6.1 External/Internal Validity

Case study research can be particularly prone to bias because of its reliance on the researcher themselves as the primary research 'instrument' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to Bryman and Bell (2015), one of the ways in which internal validity can be assured is for the researcher to have their interpretations of the data checked with participants. In line with this, Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 239) claim that member checking *"is the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility"*. However, other researchers such as Sparkes (1998, cited in Morrow, 2005), question the amount of reliance on this method, for them, the use of member checking as a method of verification is suspect because it indicates that in a world of multiple realities (the researcher's and the participants'), those under study are the 'real' knowers and, as such, the possessors of truth. They also contend that there is the possibility of

researcher/participant disagreement on interpretations. Therefore, participant feedback alone cannot be taken as direct validation of the researcher's interpretations. Due to the nature of the first study and the focus groups, it would have been too difficult to obtain unanimous support with a group finding. Instead, a tactic to maintain a chain of evidence to enable the reader of a study to follow the evidence from the initial research question to the case study conclusion (Yin, 2009) was adopted. As such, this thesis adopted a position that it was the researcher's responsibility to self-restrain their own assumptions and values as far as possible, both self-consciously and with the help of others (both participants, peers and supervisory team) then to be as transparent as possible in reporting the findings, including being open about their own failures and the limitations of the methods employed. This was largely achieved by making sure researcher presence did not threaten the ecological validity of the study in unhelpful ways. For example, the researcher's role was mediated by the responses of the student consumers themselves, which varied depending on the way the researcher had been introduced to the focus groups and the individual semi-structured interviews. For example, some students viewed the researcher as a lecturer since they had already been taught by the researcher, to other students the interviewer was merely a researcher they were unfamiliar with and in most cases, it was the first contact with them. On the whole, attempts were made throughout the data collection to reduce bias by frequently considering some of the inevitable features of interviews that may affect both the researcher and the participants, this included role-playing, stereotyping, perceptions of the situation and understanding of the issues raised, etc. (Cohen et al., 2002). Furthermore, bias was not only minimised by maintaining impartiality throughout the data collection stages it was also a focus in the analysis stages, which involved ensuring that the data was collected accurately and fully, and avoided

subjective selectivity by recording the interviews. Furthermore, a structured approach was also used to add rigour to the analysis process, aided by the use of NVivo. Bazeley and Jackson (Eds.), (2013) support this and promote the potential computer-assisted (or aided) qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) provides to researching more methodically, thoroughly, and attentively with more rigorous analysis.

Given the interpretivist philosophical stance of this thesis the following set of interpretive criteria (adapted from Noble and Smith, 2015) was adopted for maintaining quality of this thesis:

1. Accounting for personal biases (researcher's position as a lecturer) which may have influenced findings;
2. Acknowledging biases in sampling and ongoing critical reflection of methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of data collection and analysis;
3. Meticulous record keeping (both through hard copy notes and NVivo memos), demonstrating a clear decision trail and ensuring interpretations of data are consistent and transparent;
4. Establishing a comparison, seeking out similarities and differences across accounts to ensure different perspectives are represented;
5. Including rich and thick verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts to support findings;
6. Demonstrating clarity (using the hermeneutic framework) in terms of thought processes during data analysis and subsequent interpretations;
7. Engaging with other researchers to reduce research bias
8. Respondent validation: includes inviting participants to comment on the interview transcript and whether the final themes and concepts created adequately reflect the phenomena being investigated (study three only)

Table 6. Summary of the external/internal validity approaches the current thesis adopted.

3.7 Ethical Concerns Linked to Trustworthiness

Saunders et al. (2009, p. 183-184) define ethics in research as *"the appropriateness of your behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work or are affected by it"*. The purpose of ethics is therefore to ensure that the subject, the

research community and the organisation are treated fairly and that any information they impart is not used in such a way that will harm them (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In addition to this, according to Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2002), when carrying out primary data collection in an educational environment there must be evidence of ethical considerations. Data was collected in accordance with the University's Ethics Committee. All three studies which comprised the case study were granted approval from the Northumbria University Ethics Committee. Study one, which was concerned with the collection of data in the online environment, required an in-depth, distinct section to discuss ethical issues, as it is an extremely contested area. Therefore, this was integrated into the research design as it impacted the process of data collection. Study two and study three were deemed an ethical risk level medium. This meant that the research only consisted of non-vulnerable adults and non-sensitive personal data referring to a living individual, this therefore implied that consent should be considered as well as confidentiality/anonymity issues. Therefore, these two studies followed the ethical guidelines presented in the following section.

Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p. 60) stress the importance of being clear *"that the world of others is being subjected to some form of scrutiny"* and permission therefore needs to be sought from these significant others. Furthermore, Bell (2014) places emphasis on the importance of informing all those involved in the study of the motives and intentions as to why it is taking place; all participants were therefore fully informed of the nature of each of the research studies. Participants were requested to complete a University Informed Consent form (Appendices B3 and C3) which provided them with the opportunity to opt out of being named and being recorded. It was important that participants engaged in the research in a voluntary way (Silverman,

2013) and participants were told that they could withdraw from the focus group discussions/semi-structured interviews at any time.

As part of the developing relationship with the participants, the researcher takes on deep ethical obligations. This includes the responsibility to report the interviews accurately, to keep visual data shared under the researcher's control (providing a safe archive for photos (study one) and transcripts), and the commitment not to harm participants' privacy and security in line with the Data Protection Act 2018 which is now the UK's implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The participants' right not to answer particular questions was pointed out on the consent form (Cohen et al., 2002) and questions were designed so as to capture what the respondents might prefer to say, which the research undertaken concurred with, rather than promoting a personal agenda (Cohen et al., 2002). In order to maintain the anonymity of participants a different criterion is applied;

- A number is assigned to all participants (a chronological order is followed in relation to the day participants filled out the consent form).
- Participants are treated respectfully and courteously at all times.
- No information obtained from the research is or will be reported in a manner that could possibly identify or harm the participants.

Finally, on an annual basis, ethical approvals are subject to auditing by the University research and ethics governance group. As such, all three studies were audited by the university research governance review in September 2017 and September 2018. This confirmed that all the data collected during this PhD investigation was conducted to a very high standard. The audit of the ethical approach followed within this study has involved independent reviewers.

3.7.1 Unique Ethical Considerations for Netnography

Internet research ethics have evolved in recent years and these issues have been further subject to consideration given the proliferation of new online platforms (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). However, there has been increasing complexity regarding consumers and their (virtual) spaces, and the widening of data available to netnographers raising ethical questions regarding how it can be obtained. Kozinets's (2015) recommendations for disclosure to the communities within the research studies differ in their approach to covert observation of online consumer behaviour. The current study considered that obtaining consent amongst fragmented networks of stakeholders across multiple digital platforms (Twitter and Instagram groups) was a practical and ethical challenge, likely to be complicated further as online content, even that generated by users, becomes the intellectual property of the actors hosting the platform (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Therefore, in line with the recommendation that it could be ethically just to study some online communities without asking permission (Kozinets, 2010), disclosure was avoided. A further consideration in deciding whether the online community in question could be studied in a covert fashion was whether writing or posting in the online community requires registration. Kozinets (2002a & b) prompts researchers by advising that many commercial sites have proprietary rights to their content including discussions between site users. Because of this, many companies have denied the usage of online discussions for research purposes. Therefore, supported by the university ethics group, the stance taken in this thesis was that if the material was publicly available, it could be used for research, and the legal question is separate from the ethical questions. A further point included in the ethical concerns of the research design was that of access. Langer and Beckman (2005) state that a key criterion for determining whether online

content is in the public or private domain relates to the restriction of access. These authors state that if access to the observable communication or content is restricted by the use of passwords, then the communication and content can be regarded as private. In contrast, if no password restrictions are in place then the content can be regarded as public. Thus, hashtags can be accessed without recourse to passwords. In fact, according to Murthy (2018) an important motivation for using a hashtag is that anyone can click on a hashtag and be directed to a page showcasing the feed of all the most recent tweets that contain that particular hashtag. Twitter users place hashtags in their tweets to categorise them in a way that makes it simple for other users to locate and follow tweets about a specific topic or theme (Murthy, 2018). Therefore, based on this information the current study adopted a direct covert observer netnographic approach through the use of a hashtag which was deemed ethically sound. In addition to this, the university ethics team was consulted regarding the ethical risk of the research. The project was deemed low risk as it consisted of analysing secondary data which had previously been published in the public domain. Therefore, ethical approval was granted on the condition that the research was ethically aware and it did not breach plagiarism or copyright regulations, the university research ethics policy was used to ensure this occurred.

3.8 Limitations of Method Considered for Research Design

3.8.1 Netnography

In order to employ netnography the method's limitations were considered. The contested ethical issues associated with conducting netnography have been discussed in the previous section; this was one of many issues that influenced the research design. Netnography is completely focused on online consumers or virtual communities where individuals participate without direct face-to-face interactions

(Kozinets, 2002b). Observational data collected using netnography in this thesis did not provide direct access to the perceptions, values and beliefs of informants and revealed little about the informant's internal states. Therefore, the researcher required superior interpretive skills in order to understand online collectives of consumers and also familiarity with the different methods so that they could gather relevant information. Indeed, this is not a limitation that is confined to online observations, what makes the interpretive skills more important for a netnographer is the limited access to other cues researchers use to understand behaviour such as body language, tone of speech etc. These limitations can be enriched somewhat by careful use of convergent data collection methods that bridge offline and online research in a methodical manner (Kozinets 1998, 2002a & b); this was achieved in the current study via the extensive researcher field notes recorded throughout the study and the continuous hermeneutic approach adopted to combine the emic and etic understanding of the participants. This was assessed continuously by the interpretive group (i.e. the researcher's supervisory team).

A further issue relating to collecting data online is the immediacy and accessibility of data afforded by Netnography. This frequently required the researcher to question the currency of content and its accelerated perishability (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). It was found that data that was trending one day within forums as highly influential stimulated very limited interaction the next and was even ignored the next week. It is therefore incumbent on the researcher to provide a very articulate, detailed approach to data collection, to ensure that access to archived data within the online environment under study is always available and to manage these challenges along with the complexities involved in big data sets. As such, every effort was made throughout the

data collection process to ensure that data collected could be retrieved at any point by the researcher.

3.8.2 Focus Groups and Semi-Structured Interviews

Langford and McDonagh (2003) highlight some concerns when conducting focus groups, claiming that when mixing multiple research, participants' focus groups can lose the thread of the debate, further sacrificing the quality of the discussion. The authors go on to describe the threat dominant individual participants may pose in deterring other participants from contributing and the other informants merely agreeing with them. The researcher was mindful of this activity from the start and therefore attempts were made throughout to encourage participants to offer their individual thoughts on each theme of discussion, ensuring debate kept on topic. A further limitation of the focus groups conducted at Stage Two was individual conversations taking place between two participants that were on topic but not part of the general group discussion. This happened frequently during the early stages of data collection in the focus groups. Learning to recognise when this was taking place, the researcher managed this within the research process so that data collection did not miss the opportunity to capture rich insights from these discussions.

A final consideration throughout design was the challenge of students as participants. The participants of two focus groups (FG2 and FG9) and six of the semi-structured interviews in Stage Three consisted of participants who were students taught by the researcher at the time of data collection, this study acknowledges this as a limitation, participants may have been influenced by the presence of their lecturer as the focus group moderator.

3.9 Chapter Summary

The aim of this chapter was to provide comprehensive insight into the methodological approach taken and details of the data collection methods used. This chapter opened with a discussion of the philosophical paradigm within the boundaries of which the present research was conducted. This chapter has demonstrated how the core stages that make up the methodological framework can be used as a foundation towards collecting primary data. A qualitative case study approach was justified on ontological, epistemological, and methodological grounds, and the design of the research discussed. Within this broader context, detailed data collection and analysis techniques were presented and their adoption rationalised. The limitations of each selected method were considered during the research design, and criteria to judge the validity and reliability of the study were expounded upon, with reference made to how these criteria were satisfied. It would be naïve in a study exploring the multiple interpretations of consumer realities to suggest that other methodological and analytical approaches would not produce different results. However, the processes described in this chapter provided evidence capable of addressing the research aim and objectives from the findings, which are presented in the next chapter, Chapter Four, Findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

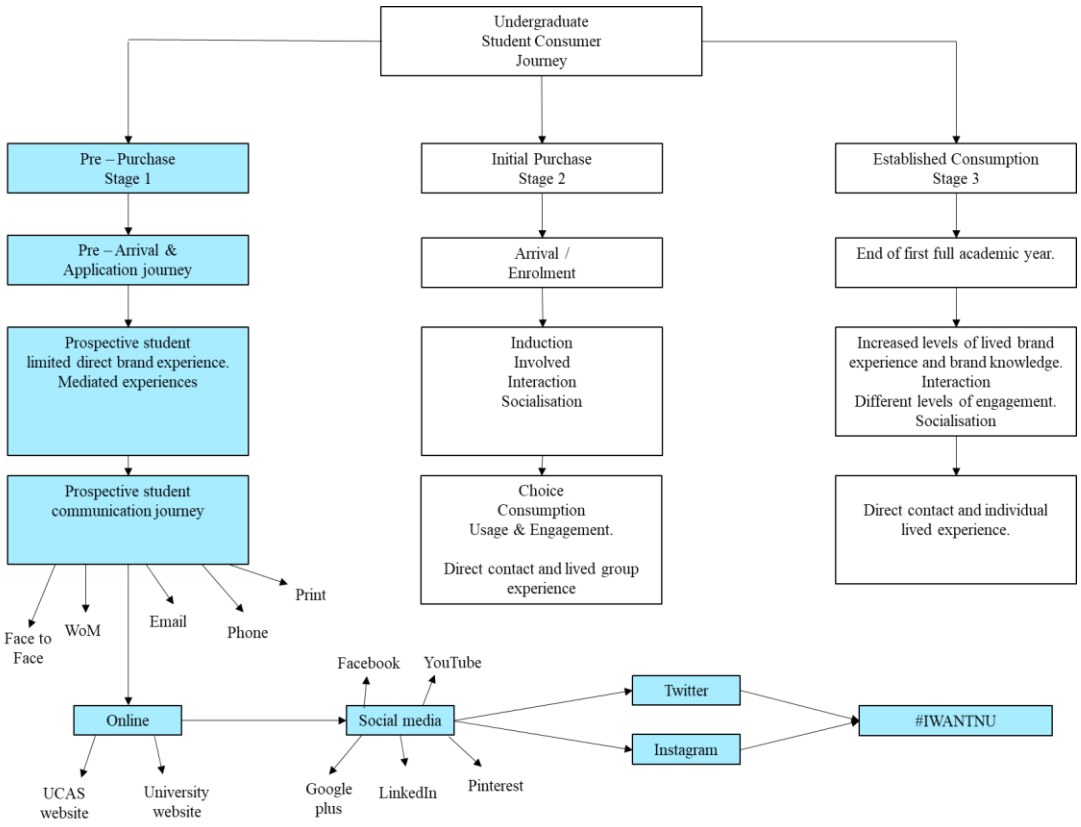
4.0 Chapter Four Introduction

The specific purpose of this chapter is to present the themes synthesised from the data that respond to the research objectives across the three consumption stages of the student consumer journey. These objectives included the adoption of a co-creative framework to conduct the three studies which maps brand meaning as a process across the student consumer longitudinal journey at the pre-purchase stage, initial purchase stage and the established consumption stage. Therefore, this chapter is organised into three parts. Part 1 presents the findings of the pre-purchase stage of the prospective student consumer journey. Part 2 discusses the findings from the initial purchase stage of the student consumer journey and Part 3 details the findings of the more established consumption stage of the student consumer journey. To conclude this chapter, an interpretation of the findings is provided, to explain how this thesis demonstrates how brand meaning emerges across the student consumer journey in the HE environment.

4.1 Part 1 - Pre-purchase Stage Findings

This section provides insight into the pre-arrival conceptions of the university brand on the student consumer journey and establishes whether conscious brand meaning exists at this stage. Figure 13 Presents the framework (adapted from Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) used to explore these findings.

Figure 13. Student consumer journey communication framework for pre-purchase stage

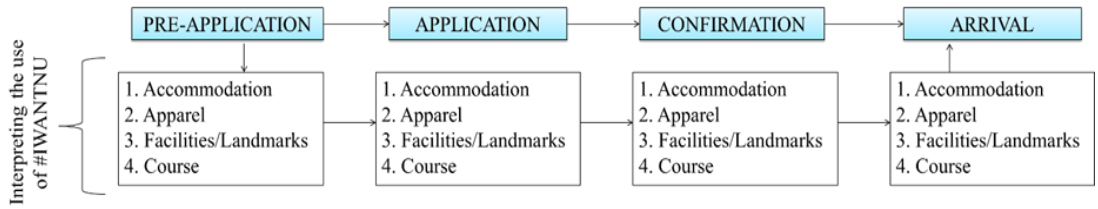


This model details the three crucial consumer stages across the undergraduate student consumer journey, it also highlights key behaviours of focus at each stage of the journey and possible modes of communication that helped to reveal possible touchpoints that altered the way the student consumers felt about the university.

In addition to the student consumer journey framework developed to guide the key findings of this thesis, an additional figure (see Figure 14) was also created to illustrate the results of the pre-purchase stage thematic analysis. The findings revealed that there were four key touchpoints in the pre-purchase transitional journey (see Figure 14).

Initially, the pre-purchase stage was going to be explored as one entire stage. The extant literature had not suggested that intensity would vary significantly, specifically in the context this thesis explores. However, the findings revealed that communication of the '#IWANTNU' hashtag intensified around the pre-application, application, confirmation and arrival touchpoints, therefore these touchpoints were used to demonstrate what the key topics of conversation were revealing about the brand across the pre-purchase stage (see Figure 14). Furthermore, this emphasis on touchpoints at this stage, that is any active or passive interaction the student consumer has with the university, provided an additional guide/focal point for the exploration of findings, e.g., exploring how many touchpoints it takes before the student consumers buy into the brand and co-create brand meaning.

Figure 14. Pre-arrival stages and main topic areas of discussion for users in the hashtag community.



As discussed in Chapter 3, the online communication platforms Twitter and Instagram were selected to track the hashtag #IWANTNU across the four main touchpoints, based on relevance to the research question, high 'traffic' and frequency of posting. Across these four main touchpoints (pre-application, application, confirmation and arrival), four main topic areas of discussion (accommodation, apparel, facilities/landmarks and course) emerged as meaningful themes of conversation across the student consumer narratives. According to narrative processing (Escalas 2004; Holt 2002), consumers use simple features to construct narratives about the brand to

assign brand meaning, which can also help them to construct their identity around the brand. For this stage of the journey, these features included branded university clothing (apparel); communication regarding their choice of accommodation; and broad associations on their transitional journey with the city and region they were studying into narrow alliances with their course of study.

Therefore, the presentation of the pre-purchase findings adopts a structure that discusses the mediating role of the student consumer groups, brand meaning awareness prior to consumption and student consumers' co-creative motivation to drive the narrative in the hashtag community. Each section demonstrates how student consumers used these narratives at each touchpoint to create brand meaning and identity construction at this stage.

4.1.1 The Mediating Role of Student Consumer Groups

4.1.1.1 From Brand Controlled Marketing to Student Informed Co-creation

Despite the case university promoting and targeting a message appropriate to each touchpoint theme, the students' hierarchy of topics of conversation in response to the hashtag #IWANTNU remained unchanged throughout the pre-purchase stage. For example, when the university promoted the posting of conversations and images featuring university branded apparel (lanyards and hooded jumpers) in the application and confirmation stages, the prospective student consumers used the university promoted topic to change the focus of the hashtag conversation to accommodation (see screenshots 10, 11, 14 in Appendix D1). This provides an active demonstration that both the university and the student consumers not only initiate the narrative in the hashtag thread but also build on each other's narratives, highlighting that even at this early stage of the student consumer journey the university is not the only user

controlling the narrative as the theoretical model shows in Section 1.2. The student consumers do not merely repeat this narrative; they use it to co-create meaning, as they build on others' narratives (either that of the university or that of other student consumers), demonstrating that they were motivated by the others' posts to participate in the brand narrative. This is also a good example of a fragmented postmodern consumer group. Multiple realities are clearly coexisting (Featherstone, 1991) therefore, multiple meanings exist, these are multi-layered, outside agendas are emerging with some student consumers using their membership of this imagined community (Anderson, 2006; Cayla, & Eckhardt, 2008) in the hashtag to identify with other student consumers through shared lifestyles, helping to create new transitioning student consumer identities. Because of this, the data provided a unique insight into how prospective student consumers prioritise establishing student consumer groups that are central to facilitating these early university brand experiences.

For example, users demonstrated their motivation in the online environment and in a group setting to co-create meaning by discussing the university branded apparel. The rationale for this is that branded promotional clothing and 'freebies' acted as the initial catalyst for student directed conversations, yet they appeared uninterested in the discussions initiated by the university. For example, the discussion thread '#IWANTNU' on an open day was saturated from various university social media accounts encouraging students to get involved with course talks and participate in tours of the campus; *"On campus today? Make sure you check out our accommodation tours and talks!"* Instead of responding directly to the conversation started on the university Twitter platform, the majority of the prospective student consumers responded by uploading photographs of tangible items of apparel (see screenshots 1, 10, 13 in Appendix D1) that identified them with the university and as university

students. For example, lanyards promoting the university brand (see screenshots 2 & 8 in Appendix D1), the prospective student's name, and their chosen course. Photographs of lanyard and student identification cards proved very popular in the data set on open day, students were keen to evidence their affiliation with the university and their chosen course. At this stage in their transitional journey, the students were using branded apparel to demonstrate that they were exploring potential future identities through affiliation with the university. This also demonstrates the student consumer's desire for something to create a social group around, even if they are still in the process of creating meaning at this stage, such as the social links supplied by consumer tribes (Maffesoli, 1995). As such, there are both signs of student consumers learning meaning (e.g. demonstrated by their use of apparel to become community members) and co-creating one for themselves (e.g. demonstrated by the desire to form a community around the brand).

4.1.1.2 Student Consumers' Co-creation Structure – Hijacking the Narrative

Students used the opportunity to add to the narrative in social media posts as a way of joining the social group and to construct an identity; therefore, they rely on the university brand online communication at this stage to develop their sense of being a student and to shape the norms and boundaries. Simmel's (1903; 2010) insight is useful here, in the sense that a border is not a geographical fact that has sociological consequences; instead, boundaries are sociological facts that take on geographic form. That is, both technological and cultural factors are at play at this stage (Taylor, 2014). At this pre-arrival stage of the journey student consumers cannot easily travel to the university or directly contact distant others (other prospective student consumers), and correspondingly there was limited need or desire to do so. As a result, the student consumer demonstrates being *"wholly absorbed by, and remained oriented toward,*

the group" (Simmel, 2010, p. 151), and, importantly, *"was treated as a member of a group rather than as an individual"* (Simmel, 2010, p. 139). At the pre-purchase stage, social media played a vital role in revealing this process. That is, by focusing on the interplay of the technological and cultural factors in the hashtag community, the research process was able to illustrate the possible interpretations of the same social media message depending upon the platform and device used to access and transmit the message (See Figure demonstrating the complexity of communication in the social media environment section Appendix D1). This emerged at the pre-purchase stage as an essential medium to begin mapping how student consumers become encultured and exploit marketplaces resources. This relationship between symbolic and social boundaries would have remained implicit without discovering the complexities of message interpretation in the social media environment, demonstrated in Appendix D1.

The behaviours demonstrated in the student consumer narratives, e.g. prioritising establishing social groups, building on the narratives of others and the adoption of branded apparel, highlight the shaping of student consumer perceptions and expectations of the brand prior to purchase. Extrapolating the users' responses to this hashtag, illustrates at this stage that the individual begins to employ the limited knowledge that they have acquired about the brand to experiment with their identity (Donnelly & Young, 1988). At the same time, using the example of building on other hashtag community users' narratives, they are demonstrating their willingness to learn to be tribal. What this means is the student consumers are not ready-made community members; rather, they are learning how and what to consume in order to enter marketplace cultures (Goulding, Shankar & Canniford, 2013) in contemporary consumer society. At this particular stage, they do this through focussing on their

social groups of association, displaying affiliation with the university's branded apparel as well as building on a narrative of discussion that mirrors other narratives in the hashtag community. This increases student consumers' brand awareness at the confirmation touchpoint as their understanding of the brand's benefits over competing university brands including the value and meaning it brings in fulfilling their personal wants and needs (Khanna et al., 2014) starts to emerge. Brand communities appear as a useful concept to describe what is happening at this stage. This is because brand communities mediate new kinds of social relations, enabling connections between student consumers who may have never seen each other yet as they come to share a sense of moral responsibility and system of values toward the community to which they perceive themselves as belonging (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). This was demonstrated through users of the hashtag community sharing their initial engagement and experiences with the university brand online, demonstrating a clear iteration between the market, the student consumers and their network. This interactive environment also demonstrated that the student consumers are not only able to respond to brand-related communications, but also create these themselves (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Kaur, Paruthi, Islam, & Hollebeek, 2020).

4.1.2 Brand Meaning at the Pre-Purchase Stage

The abundance of branded hooded jumper posts in the hashtag community was no revelation. This is because when a prospective student consumer commits to the university via a confirmed first choice selection on their UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) account, the university sends the student a hooded jumper, branded with the university logo and the year the student plans to start their course. As part of this initiative the university asks the student to upload a 'selfie' wearing the hooded jumper and to use the hashtag to promote their photographic image

to display their association with the institution (see screenshot 6, 15, 16, 17, 18 in Appendix D1), inspiring brand engagement and celebration, a good example of marketing and branding from the sender side in action. However, this is only a 'good example' because the students clearly want to engage with the university brand, as such they are co-creating through choice.

What was an important finding from the data set was how quickly a separate topic of discussion accompanying the 'selfie' emerged. For example, one user posted (see screenshot 23 in Appendix D1) a picture in a university hooded jumper and exclaimed; *"Woo Northumbria hoody! #excited #IWANTNU"* Another user quickly commented on her post with: *"Hey. What course are you doing?"* The discussion continues with the original poster: *"I am doing Law, how about you?"* These examples not only strengthen further the student's motivation to co-create meaning through building on/changing the narrative in the hashtag, they also demonstrate that prospective student consumers are posting about the university brand in a meaningful way because they have been accepted by the university. Specifically, just as the previous example highlights a good example of marketing from the university side only because the student consumer chose the university, these examples represent the university brand choosing the student consumer. This understanding of university brand choice in the postmodern era has implications for the ways in which brand meaning is co-created. For example, Simmel (2010) suggests that if an objective controlling structure has been built up (e.g. the hashtag community and its use by the university at the pre-purchase stage) this might be beyond individual interests but nevertheless to their advantage. An example of this is presented in the posts because the posts demonstrate student consumers acting/reacting in a specific way because they have been accepted by the brand. This act initiates the early stages of the student consumers' search for

status (Veblen, 1899; 1994), through the marketplace and marketplace resources; this essentially becomes a never-ending quest that creates, manifests and continuously transforms the student consumers' status on their enculturation journey with the brand in the HE environment.

The student consumers at this stage are also building on the narrative to discuss themes which were related to their identity construction e.g. course of study (see screenshots 4, 6, 14 in Appendix D1). This is a good example of what Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar (2007) call 'active play' with marketplace resources. Marketplace resources are typically practised in consumer tribes. In the process of 'play' tribal consumers deconstruct and reassemble marketplace resources through a process, value is thus found in the social links, which are produced as a result of this process (Canniford, 2011; Kozinets, 2017). For example, some student consumers become part of a tribe, and the university hooded jumper provides a differentiated identity away from the university, whereas within their course of study everyone is part of the same tribe at the university. In addition to this, there were frequent examples of prospective students demonstrating their affiliation not just with the university but also with their allocated accommodation. For example, one student posted; "*Room all booked and confirmed!! @TrinitySquareNU #IWANTNU".* Another student posted: *"Can't wait to go to uni now!!Even more excited to live in Trinity Square it looks amazing #IWANTNU"*. Therefore, even when the conversation began with an Instagram post picturing apparel, accommodation received significantly more engagement, further emphasising the priority of establishing social groups related to place. This is another example of how the tribe and brand community interactions emerge within the social group network and how brand meanings are created and experienced within the community. The motivation of users continued fixed on this topic of discussion

(accommodation), demonstrating that the student narrative was more important than the university marketing driven messages. This also reveals some of the power tensions emerging in the hashtag community e.g. this could be due to the university not sending out what student consumers perceive as meaningful communication or a fear of conflict with each other, as demonstrated in the previous co-creation example (the student consumer chose the university and the university brand chose the student consumer). It was evident these posts also enabled the expansive topic of identity through affiliation with the university to quickly transform into a conversation about the course of study.

Social media networks are playing an important role at this pre-purchase stage; however, social media is only one actor involved in the network of associations at play. It plays the role of providing the environment for the tribes and brand communities to co-create experience and meaning. Further support of this was demonstrated in the interchanging use of two key social medias. In addition to the Twitter posts, Instagram posts featuring branded university hooded jumpers initiated further peer to peer communication not only in relation to course selection but also in relation to accommodation choice. Accommodation is a well-established topic of conversation in the transitioning student literature (Thomas, 2012), but what the findings of the pre-purchase stage did suggest was that the students were aware that their accommodation would be a significant factor in promoting the establishment of initial social networks, once more highlighting the co-evolutionary processes of on-going practices and elements of the social (network) structure. Throughout these posts regarding accommodation the students sought and offered reassurances to each other; they evaluated expectations and helped to alleviate tensions. Student conversations moved quickly from identifying themselves with the university to seeking to establish

social groups prior to their arrival (see screenshot 10 in Appendix D1) through identifying themselves with specific accommodation. Therefore, what is happening here is that the cultural knowledge of the brand (created through the hashtag, which is acting as a cultural intermediary, see earlier discussions) is challenged and re-produced so it becomes more meaningful and personal to the student consumers. Personalisation is sought after by postmodern consumers in the contemporary environment. This is happening as initial pillars of a student brand community emerge as well as tribes. Tensions between these groups and other actors in the network of associations are a natural reality at this stage as the student consumers' own interpretation of student self is being challenged (perhaps even unlearned) whilst the normative and prevalent cultural knowledge of it changes as well. This is an indication of the iterations between student consumers, social groups, the marketplace and the brand (see screenshots 16,18, 21, 22 Appendix D1).

Further examples of this 'active play' with marketplace resources (Cova et al., 2007) included student consumers' curated posts on the university facilities and the use of specific landmarks in posts (see screenshots 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 in Appendix D1), which were perceived and positioned favourably in the minds of the student consumers such as one Instagram image of Newcastle quayside which included the caption: *"So excited to hopefully be moving to Newcastle in September after visiting again today #IWANTNU"*) (see screenshot 24 in Appendix D1). It is important to note from these findings and across the four key touchpoints that the student consumer posts illustrate that value cannot only be created solely through the university's posts; it needs to be continually co-created through the student consumers building on the narratives of both the university and other hashtag user members. By exploring the interactions between student consumers and their peers and the student consumers and the

university (see screenshot 20 in Appendix D1) this makes sense of the previously discussed power tensions involved in co-creation in the HE environment and the student consumer nexus and how it works in practice. Although the university has initiated a lot of discussion, curated some content and influenced a high level of control over the topics that are discussed on the social media pages, student users display having the option of ignoring posts or commenting in any direction that they choose to pursue. However, what the university brand does appear to be able to control is when the intensity of interactions occurs, a further example of the active and passive interactions that shape the student consumer brand experience, relationship with the brand and the marketplace. Furthermore, after a while of being immersed in the hashtag, frequent (high involvement) posters began to emerge, these types of posters tended to post information or comments to start themes of discussion, which attracted the attention of other kinds of hashtag users and encouraged them to participate in the community. Therefore, these high involvement posters (screenshot 15 in Appendix D1 poster was a frequent poster in the #IWANTNU community) were extremely important to the hashtag community and the creation of value, more so than the university. Essentially, what this demonstrates is the evolving and dynamic nature of meaning in the postmodern environment. Student consumers clearly engage with the university social media communication, which precipitated cultural knowledge of the brand. Yet postmodern conditions determine meaning is not static, it is constantly being challenged and re-iterated for the student consumers to make sense of. Therefore, the cultural intermediaries that are being used by the student consumers at this stage such as university branded apparel, accommodation, course and facilities are part of the cultural knowledge that emerges from the university brand and is used by the student consumers as a marketplace resource to make sense of their brand

experiences and co-create meaning. As such, there is some level of brand meaning existing at the pre-purchase stage of the journey, the student consumers using marketplace resources to co-create meaning have demonstrated this, but it is clear the student consumers are not aware of some aspects of the brand, aspects that appear to be derived through direct lived experience with the brand.

4.1.3 Summary of Pre-purchase stage findings

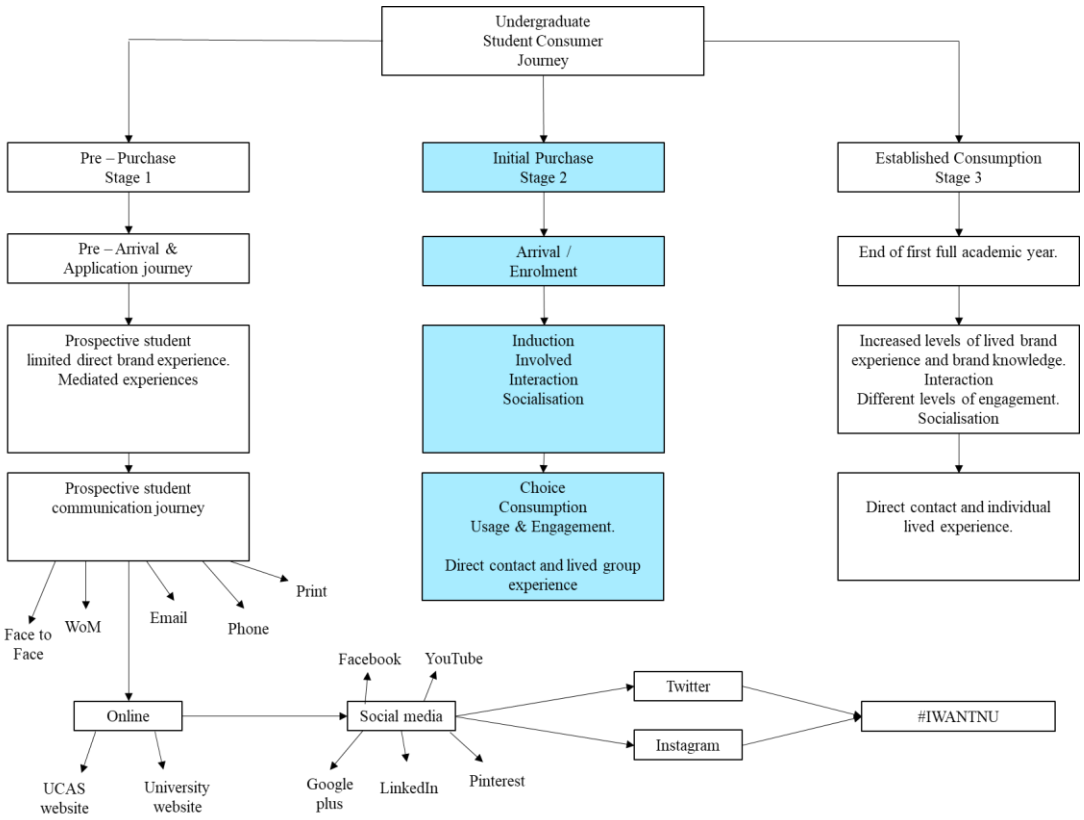
The findings from the pre-purchase stage of the student consumer journey pointed to the significance of users driving the narrative in the hashtag in order to initiate the early stages of brand meaning co-creation. This was illustrated through the four key topics of discussion across the four key touchpoints. The rationale for the student consumers prioritising finding social groups at the pre-purchase stage is a result of postmodern society conditions. That is, individuals in postmodern society are vulnerable, therefore they want to find stabilising social networks to protect themselves from the fragmentation and hyperreal world of consumer society. The brand facilitates these social networks, and this results in lots of disjointed experiences where multiple realities co-exist. As a result, meanings become more detached from the original source (e.g. the brand) and are subject to an endless re-appropriation and re-contextualisation of previous meanings as the student consumers build on each other's narratives and the brand. As such, the student consumers are demonstrating purposeful experimentation behaviour at this stage, they actively engage with the brand and attempt to take ownership of co-creating brand meanings. These meanings are very much ingrained into their sense of self and community. They are experimenting with various ways in which the brand can be experienced across the four touchpoints, demonstrating both tribal behaviour and the gradual forming of a brand community. They learn about the brand and challenge its cultural knowledge,

this shapes experience and forms part of the constant iterations between the brand, the student consumer, marketplace and the network of associations.

Having considered the findings from the pre-purchase stage of the student consumer journey it was clear meaning was emerging, but it was not yet co-created, as the university and the student consumers were commenting on different narratives, therefore an additional study was required further along the journey to further explore the brand meaning process in the HE environment.

4.2 Part 2 – Initial Purchase Stage

Figure 15: Student consumer journey communication framework for initial purchase stage



At the pre-purchase stage, the student consumers engaged with other fellow student consumers and related cultural knowledge of the brand. This cultural knowledge was largely instigated by the university, yet brand meaning started to emerge for the student consumers as they began to form a network of associations. The pre-purchase stage also illustrated the formation of communities in the online environment and how these communities contributed to the shaping of student consumer identities. At the pre-purchase stage of the journey brand meaning was foremost influenced by the student consumer experiences, here we are reminded of Berry's (2000) service branding model, that is, characteristics of the service marketplace such as group experience, traditions/rituals and physical facilities lead to greater brand awareness and brand meaning. Berry's service branding model (see Figure 8 in Section 2.4.1.3), offers a useful framework to relate the findings of the initial purchase stage back to brand meaning. The main themes discussed in this section are the role of the university sport sub-brand and how this contributes to the shaping of student consumer identities and brand meaning (e.g. Berry's customer experience construct) and the evolving fragmentation of student consumer groups at this stage and how they use tribes to overcome this to co-create meaning.

Due to the student consumers, prioritising establishing social groups at the pre-purchase stage of the journey it was important to capture the influence of this in context; therefore, focus groups were used to achieve this at the initial purchase stage (see further discussion on how focus groups were used to achieve this in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2).

4.2.1 Physical Facilities, Identity and Brand Awareness

Through the use of some key marketplace resources at this stage (generated by the university's present brand and external communications constructs from Berry's

framework) it is clear that the student consumers are experiencing the university brand at a different level now. It is evident that their brand knowledge has evolved and as such, they are engaging with different aspects of the brand. When probed about their choice of university, e.g. *'Tell me a bit about your thoughts on why you chose Northumbria University',* student consumers responded with discussion points relating to facilities. Although facilities was a discussion point in the pre-purchase stage, discussion was surface level and descriptive, it represented a passive awareness level of involvement. This was due in part to the fact that the student consumers had little direct contact with the physical environment at this stage and thus were reliant on the cultural knowledge of the group in the online environment to shape perceptions. However, at the initial stage of the journey, the physical facility exists as a core brand association due to their developing lived experience of the brand and the shared experiences in the physical environment, which has fostered the formation of a group identity. Therefore, as this stage developed both in terms of familiarity with the group and their own responses, participants were revealing more in depth knowledge of the university by elaborating on and discussing differentiation factors that influenced their university choice. This was because from the outset of this stage 'sport' emerged early on as a differentiator of choice, this was no revelation as sports students were the sample for the focus groups. However, what it did reveal was that similar to the pre-purchase stage not only was emphasis placed on strengthening social groups/networks but student consumers started to use the university's sport identity to initiate early stages of their individual identity construction. Hence, when discussing facilities, the students' discussions were more specific about what they were referring to:

(P3:FG4): *"facilities were better yeh, sport as well, compared to others like the sports facilities were ten times better than the others…."*

As discussion developed, characteristics of the university served as levers, which were used to strengthen student consumer's identification with the provider (Underwood, Bond & Baer, 2001), and with other student consumers. In relation to brand awareness, this specifically followed the form of a group experience, which led to discussions on physical facilities, sport facilities, social identification which developed into brand knowledge. Berry's (2000) framework (see Figure 8 Section 2.4.1.3) helps to demonstrate that student consumer experiences with the organisation have led to group experiences and physical facilities have emerged as a strong association of brand meaning. This is also captured by the construct external brand communications in Berry's (2000) model, which refers to the information that consumers gather about the service brand from uncontrolled sources such as word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth communications are perceived by consumers to be largely un-biased and experience-based and are often a major influence in the pre-purchase decision making stage (Berry, 2000), especially when the purchase is of a high involvement nature, e.g. enrolling at a university for three years. This use of the physical facility and WoM interaction to shape brand meaning co-creation is evident in the data, such as in the case of one participant where reality of his lived experience met with his expectations:

(C: FG7): *"my mate went to Lancaster, and he was doing something sport wise there sport coaching science, something like that, and I was telling him about Northumbria and said I've been accepted there, he was like god have ya, I was like what do you mean by that and he says its got a massive reputation within universities for sport, and he says I would definitely take it if you can, so I just came down one day, It wasn't even at open day I just came to check out the facilities and that, and just went Jesus he's not wrong and here I am".*

It was clear from some of the student consumers' accounts that sport was an important factor forming their brand awareness, this was continuously strengthened by the university as it was a visible part of the university's promotional strategy and identity

(see screenshot from university website in Appendix E of sport as a visible part of the university's promotional strategy). Furthermore, this example also illustrates how the lived experience adds to the meaning created by WoM interactions and therefore WoM emerges as a motivator to explore, and experience as a confirmatory influence. The impact of external brand communications (see Berry's framework) was demonstrated further in student consumers' responses when they discussed examples of some outsiders who had co-created meaning which they shared with the student consumers:

(S: FG8): *"like quite a few people from my school and college have all come to Northumbria, there's like a massive group of them, they just always talked about sport, and how it good it was and stuff"*

In addition to the influence of WoM communication and facilities shaping brand meaning, these responses have also revealed where the student consumers have differentiated the university from its competitors based on sport, therefore, it is a differentiated brand at this stage, highlighting further they are experiencing the brand at a different level using the cultural intermediary of sport. Therefore, for some student consumers at this stage it was a brand, because the university positioned sport as central to the brand identity and so did the student consumers. As such, through their accounts of their experience they made it explicit that if it had not been for sport they would not have been aware of the university and therefore would not have considered the university in their decision-making:

(J: FG8): *"no I didn't actually come (to open day) but, I knew that they had a Gaelic team, and they were quite good sooo erm and I have known people before who have played for the Gaelic team, so that's why I decided…I researched about it yeh before I came"*

What these quotes also show is that some student consumers need to experience the brand before they can create meaning, whereas others revealed just having a niche

product (e.g. a specific sports team) was enough to differentiate. These contradictions were consistent throughout the findings as other student consumers demonstrated that university marketing had not worked for them, but invisible marketing had co-created the brand (P: FG9): "*must have been, I don't even know, it might have been my college to be honest, I think they just said what open days are and where"*, demonstrating the fragmented nature of student consumer meaning making and the challenge this presents for HE marketers.

It was clear that the initial experiences within the first few weeks of starting at university had increased familiarity with the brand, enriching the brand learning and socialisation. However, these experiences continued to demonstrate fragmentation, the student consumers' different ways of being and how their realities illustrated a jigsaw collage of multiple representations of selves and preferences even when approaching discussion on the same university brand. Therefore, given that customer experience is purported to be a key component in service brand meaning (Berry, 2000), these multiple representations as a consequence of a fragmented postmodern society reflect the brand being interpreted in parts rather than a one meaning whole.

4.2.2 Fragmentation, Interpretation and Social Groups

Individuals in postmodern society are in constant flux, acquiring as many resources as possible in order to open up more opportunity for possible selves. These resources are assembled from socio-cultural experiences, both lived and mediated (Markus & Nurius, 1986), providing more opportunity for endless selves (Gergen, 1991). Indeed, the student consumers attended to different certain messages and resources to make sense of the meaning according to their different personal perceptions, social networks and brand knowledge (Anderson & Meyer, 1988). Hence, regardless of their exposure to these mediated experiences, the student consumers did not seem to share equally a

common view on university choice. This is problematic, as the typical marketer's view is that brands with a single shared brand meaning do better prior to purchase. Consistent with asking the student consumers to reflect on mediated experiences, they were also asked to discuss whether prior expectations had been met by the university:

(C: FG4): *"like… I dunno, in a bad way it's like really not what I expected…I expected it to be like you come here and meet everyone and know everyone and then are able to do things and go out….whereas it's completely different…."*

This response highlights further the iterative nature of brand meaning in the HE environment, social groups have emerged again as central to developing an understanding of what the brand means at this stage. However, at this stage, they are engaging with different aspects relating to social network formation (e.g. expectations, social group size) and these are central to facilitating brand experience. Similarly, there are findings relating to the challenges and opportunities of engaging in relationship building amongst peers as one participant (C: FG3) posits*: "you never know who is in your class" "yeh it will take a couple of months"* and within the same focus group (P4: FG3) explained*: "I think we have got like a really big class, so I think that's quite hard cause we've got a big class, like each seminar you go in you have got different people in your seminar".* It was evident from these participant responses that student consumers were demonstrating their motivation to move from tribes into a community. What this means is that as these communities form and lead to socialisation and further brand experience, the sense of belonging that is found in small groups can extend to a larger community, in this case the university brand is becoming more central to the community structure (Canniford, 2011; Fournier & Lee, 2009). Such activities collectively contributed to the brand relationship experience, led to student consumer learning, and therefore demonstrated at this stage that customer-to-

customer interactions were a source of brand knowledge, which provoked the brand meaning co-creation process. Student consumers' ability to actively co-create was developed, reinforced or altered because of their ongoing interactions with various forms of brand knowledge, student-to-student interactions being one of them. This collective sharing of experiential benefits represents a critical element in the sense making of HE brands (Holt, 1995), that is, the lived experiences that build a sense of associations between the student consumers contributes directly to Berry's (2000) brand equity construct.

Conversely, another theme suggests that exposure to bigger groups was not a problem for some student consumers (P:FG3): *"it's not like it's a bad thing though, like once you get to know everyone then it will be fine, it's just getting to know people"*. What this demonstrates is that as subjects of postmodernity, the student consumers are de-centred into fragmented entities (Wattanusuwan, 2005), de-centring of the subject leads consumers beyond individualism into a new 'aesthetic paradigm' in which they gather temporarily in fluid 'postmodern tribes' (Maffesoli, 1995). So, although there are examples of student consumers expecting the university brand to provide them with a focal point, others prefer to identify with other tribe fellows in the network through shared lifestyles and become a de-centred self that is situationally shaped by membership to those 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006; Van Dijk, 2020). What this means is the university is made up of multiple student consumer segments, some wanting to establish a set of social relationships that are structured around the use of a focal brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) 'brand community' and others merely wanting to use the university brand to identify with other members, i.e. tribes. This is also reflected in the work of Kates (2001) who suggests that brand communities are made up of different tribes and this awareness is not always acknowledged in research.

Central to revealing this awareness was the role played by social media earlier on in the journey. The student consumer journey has demonstrated that social media plays a role in the formation and continuity of the student communities and at this stage of the journey, sport is also emerging as a facilitator in shaping brand experience. In line with the disjointed experiences evident throughout this stage, the student consumers continue to demonstrate that some participants do offer a co-creative approach and suggest ways in which they would prefer to be promoted to by the university:

(S:FG1): *"emails, I always find with emails they are important cause they are sent specifically to me, so I'll read it and obviously go to wherever it is, whereas on social media they post so much I don't think it is important."*

These preferences demonstrate that there is a desire for personal communication, the student consumer clearly values a relationship with the brand and the disruption identified with social media communication in the pre-purchase stage (illustrated in the complexity of social media marketing communication Figure Appendix D1) could be circumvented by personal emails. This is a further example of brand cultural knowledge being challenged and re-produced so that it becomes more meaningful to the postmodern student consumer. Although previously, themes emerging from the data had illustrated that university marketing on social media was largely ineffective for some student consumers, others highlighted areas where they felt university marketing excelled:

(J: FG1): *"if advertising focussed more on the open days you know, cause that's what leaves the impression on you, not social media, not on a web page or anything it's you going to see the place and actually I think they did that quite well to be fair, everything I saw was organised and they left an impression on you, and I think that is what a lot of people look for"*

These findings demonstrate all three of the constructs (i.e. the organisations presented brand, external brand communications and customer experience with organisation) which Berry (2000) purports create brand awareness and brand meaning. For some, this direct brand experience informed meaning and had a significant influence on how they interpreted the university brand, even if they do not explicitly allude to the university being a brand in their accounts. However, this current research extends Berry's (2000) framework by proposing that in order to explain what is happening in relation to brand meaning in the HE environment, the framework needs to make allowances for the collective and individual iterations, which are central to the student consumers evolving and changing subjective realities of their experiences with the brand. That is, social interaction with others in the HE environment generates value and influences brand involvement (Xi, & Hamari, 2020) therefore, the flow of meaning in Berry's model is one way and therefore does not account for the clear iterations that are mutually determining one another in the HE environment.

The ways in which the university communicates with the student consumer and facilitates student to student communication has emerged as an important discussion point for brand awareness at this stage. First, it emphasises further the fragmented and disjointed experiences of the student consumers and second, it highlights many aspects of the student consumer socialisation process through peer-to-peer communication, with social media playing a significant role in this. Two competing theories are demonstrated in the findings, that is, some student consumers illustrate tribal behaviour (e.g. flows between different identities under different circumstances) and others use the university brand to form a social network around, e.g. consumer-brand-consumer relationship in which the brand is situated at the centre of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Kaur et al., 2020). Therefore, university choice outcomes

derive from the individual-level and group-level, the group level includes identification with the peer group as experiences. This is consistent with the compromises that individuals make to be part of a tribe or community. Particularly, this is noticeable at the sub-group level where the sport sub-brand community emerges as an important signifier of brand awareness and plays an intermediating role for the student consumers in shaping their brand experience.

4.2.3 Intermediating Role of the Sub-Brand Community

Within the focus group interviews, a strong sense of belonging started to emerge in relation to university sport. Student consumer-centric relationships were still the focus at this stage where meaning was constructed around their experiences. However, what was also emerging was a strong need for protection, the university brand is substantial with many student consumers across UG programmes, therefore in order for some of the student consumers to create a sense of meaning at this stage, the findings demonstrated that student consumers sought security with a university sub-brand, university sport (Team Northumbria). This is an indication of the consciousness of kind, an important community marker (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), whereby community members share a sense of belonging and identify themselves as members of a group in contrast to others who are not members of their group. The self is situationally shaped by this membership, as each individual identifies her/himself with other 'tribe fellows' through shared life-styles. As such, the student consumers are demonstrating what Canniford (2011) describes as oscillating between a tribe and a brand community at the same time, taking advantage of the benefits that are brought about by both consumption communities. Previously, the student consumers used the university branded hoodie to do this but here they are seeking tribes within tribes to do this, that is, where the student consumers come together to experience moments of

ecstasy, empathy and affectual immediacy (Maffesoli 1995). This example can also be described through instances of communitas, emphasising spontaneity, free expression, immediacy, the affective experience and simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties (Turner, 1969).

When asked about their expectations for the next few weeks, joining a sports team was discussed across all of the focus groups, with a great deal of those conversations using university sport team apparel as the focal point. For clarity, the apparel being discussed at this stage was not the complimentary university branded hooded jumper, which dominated discussion in the pre-purchase stage. The apparel that led discussion in the focus groups was university sport apparel, which was Team Northumbria branded (the university sport section of the university), which is also branded to identify the sport the student consumer played and was purchased at an additional cost. One of the first discussion points to emerge relating to sport team apparel was around the aesthetics of the sports kit. For example: (T: FG3) posits*: "it does look good though the Team Northumbria stuff, the kit and everything"* with another participant providing explicit examples relating to identity needs (J: FG8):*"the Gaelic team have their own gear so they bring in Irish O'Neill's, it will still have team Northumbria on but it's quite nice so yeh I probably will be looking forward to it….but it's quite expensive".* Given that apparel is not a complex product (Yan, Hyllegard, & Blaesi, 2012) and that many consumers – young adults, in particular – are highly involved in the purchase of apparel owing to its symbolic and hedonic characteristics (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985), university sport apparel emerged as very effective in meeting the student consumers' identity needs. It provided them with an easy and accessible symbolic resource, which was used to initiate brand meaning at this stage. It also emphasised the dynamic and

changing nature of symbols in practice (Turner, 1969). Therefore, these findings illustrate clear meaning co-creation for part of the university brand for sports students.

For those students involved in sport, the free university hooded jumper, which dominated social media discussion at the pre-purchase stage, no longer retained a symbolic identity marker. For example, some student consumers described their socialisation journey through their use of the free hooded jumper (A: FG3): *"I've got one but I barely…. used to wear it like, it used to be a kaki green colour, the one I got soooo, the team Northumbria one is nice so I would probably wear that"*. Through this learning process, the student consumer has envisaged that there exists not only agreement on shared meanings of some symbols but has also gained enough knowledge to develop symbolic interpretations of the brand on their own. Through the use of apparel e.g. initially wearing the free university hooded jumper provided by the university but now aspiring to wear the university sport apparel because of the meaning associated with it, the university sport tribe can shrewdly deploy these symbolic meanings to construct, maintain and meet their identity needs appropriate for the socialisation stage they are experiencing (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998). What this also demonstrates is the intermediating role of the university sub-brand community in shaping these student consumers experiences and brand meaning. A community has formed, which has brought a sense of belonging/group communitas, this has led to a socialisation process for the student consumers.

4.2.4 Consumer Identity Projects and the Sub-Brand Community

One of the most significant themes that revealed student consumer brand meaning co-creation at this stage was their illustrations of representation and evolving consumer identity projects through the use of apparel. Some students even made explicit

reference to their own marketing and promotion of the university, becoming advocates of the brand through an established brand meaning at this stage. Increased direct experience with the brand has provided them with more knowledge; this knowledge has made them aware of the importance of apparel in terms of their own identity projects. As conceptualisations of branded apparel in the literature have explained, part of the reason some brands are sought after more than others lies in the signals they communicate (Belk, 1988; Bushman, 1993; Corneo & Jeanne, 1997; McCracken, 1986), these signals could be exclusivity, prestige, or privilege. The meanings behind these brand messages are important to consumers, who sometimes adopt a brand to communicate that they themselves possess the characteristics and meanings the brand conveys (Belk, 1988; Bushman, 1993; Corneo & Jeanne, 1997; McCracken, 1986). In addition to this, there is the requirement that only an insider has access to the brand, therefore, these brands provide favourable interpersonal relationships. Consequently, followers who aspire to intragroup belongingness adopt the same brands, thus demonstrating the interplay between articulated intended brand identity of the sport sub-brand and the student consumer identities within the sub-brand community. That is, one identity leads to another, where the whole at one level becomes the part at one level, endlessly (Koestler, 1978; Kozinets, 2017). Student consumers discussed the influence of the group identity when describing their perceptions of university sport branded apparel:

(T: FG7): *"it gives you like a group identity"*

(J: FG5): *"I feel the same yeh, you're representing someone aren't you, you want to be part of the team"*

Social capital is a useful term to describe the student consumer's responses to apparel. Social capital facilitates the actions of individuals within social structures, providing an opportunity for individuals to access powerful positions by employing cultural resources in social interaction (Simmel, 1957). Simmel, (1957, p.545) suggests *"the fashionable person is regarded with mingled feelings of approval and envy; we envy him as an individual, but approve of him as a member of a set or group"*. Through the interconnected group relationships and a shared sense of identity, the student consumers are aware that if they are able to access the university sport apparel they themselves can send a variety of cultural signals throughout the marketplace that turn them into models of aspiration. For example, the university sport apparel was used to gain a sense of uniqueness, it was also used in the group context and with other student consumers who are also part of the university sport sub-brand, gatherings and communications become part of the ongoing conversations that feed back into this network of associations. According to Corneo & Jeanne (1997), the goal of such behaviour is either to ostracise others socially by using the brand as a signal of their socialisation or to avoid such ostracism themselves. The journey from the free university hooded jumper and the university sport team apparel conceptualises this well. This is because the process of receiving the university hooded jumper initially made the student consumers feel exclusively part of the university. The university hooded jumper was used to initiate early stages of their identity construction. But, this process eventually undermined the native exclusivity of the university brand in question, as the student consumers arrived on campus and evolved their socialisation, they developed different aspirations for more of that exclusivity. They fast recognised that the university sport apparel which is part of the sport sub-brand community is an effective way to achieve this, a clear demonstration that brand meanings are

experienced and negotiated within these communities. This is also a good example of what Bengtsson and Firat (2006) describe as brand literacy. This refers to the student consumers' ability to make sense of and compose the signs of a brand culture, to understand the meaning systems that are at play and go beyond the immediate surface meanings of the words and symbols associated with the university brand (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006; Lawlor, Dunne, & Rowley, 2016). These meanings are produced throughout the university brand journey where student consumers and cultural intermediaries contribute to the production and re-production of the brand.

When probed further about how they feel when wearing university sport branded apparel, a different theme emerged. For example 'A' comments (FG3): *"if you look the part as well it will make you feel more confident like representing"*. This initial statement triggered similar identity construction perceptions from other participants in the group: with (T: FG3) suggesting*: "especially if you are going to your placement or to do a bit of volunteering it will look good having your kit like showing you are from Northumbria".* Previous research (Fournier, 1998; MacInnis, Park, & Priester, 2014) on brand meaning has demonstrated that consumers' relationships with brands evolve over time, signalling that the meaning consumers ascribe to brands changes as they progress through different life stages (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006). At this initial purchase stage for some student consumers, the university brand has defined meaning for them, that is, having the opportunity to promote their university sport apparel to the outliers of the university. Therefore, even though there is no explicit reference in relation to being part of the university brand at this stage, some student consumers are displaying behaviours which illustrate they are part of the brand and the brand does have non-conscious meaning for them.

This implicit display of affiliation with the university brand was illustrated throughout the focus groups at this initial purchase stage. For one of the focus groups (FG9), university sport apparel discussions advanced to conversations about socially acceptable norms when using apparel. When asked if the university sports kit was important to them, responses illustrated the process of brand meaning making (M: FG9): *"mmmm, I don't like wearing it around uni, cause you just get the piss taken out of ya"*. In contrast to some of the aspirational accounts previously discussed at this stage, this participant is aware of different perceptions surrounding university sport apparel use, specifically on campus. The student consumer, due to various peer-to-peer interactions they have experienced, is aware meaning exists, demonstrated through the act of not wearing university sport apparel on campus. However, he is also clearly searching for an identity, it is important for the socialisation stage (see Figure 9 Donnelly & Young (1988) and Kleine & Kleine's (2000) enculturation adapted flow model) of the consumer journey he is currently experiencing. Furthermore, identity is discussed in depth and that identity is related to the university sub-brand but this is not understood, yet it is clear that he is evidencing that his identity is linked to the brand and the student consumer journey and both provide meaning. This illustrates a theme prevalent across many of the focus groups, essentially, the student consumers are discussing how they create or even loan a brand meaning, this further exemplifies that other student consumers are a big part of the service brand meaning experience. These findings substantiate Berry's (2000) framework of service brand experience, which indicate that where service brands are concerned, experience dominates brand meaning.

4.2.5 Summary of Initial-purchase Stage Findings

The theme of university sporting apparel at this stage of the journey has highlighted the importance of identity construction across the student consumer journey and the influence this has on brand meaning creation for the student consumers. Employing Donnelly and Young's (1988) socialisation stages framework (see Figure 9) to interpret the student consumers' descriptions suggested that the student consumers were illustrating behaviour similar to that of the discovery stage. This is the stage where the individual evaluates whether the subcultural identity role that they have adopted meets with their expectations (demonstrated in the previous account). What this also points towards is a need to explore subjective perceptions and the influence of student consumer changing individual realities and meaning co-creation.

Direct brand experiences (Berry, 2000; Xi, & Hamari, 2020) through a number of brand and peer-to-peer interactions has clearly allowed the student consumer to assess whether the knowledge they have gained thus far is relevant for their enculturation lifecycle (Dean et al., 2016). Furthermore, through the process of personal interpretation, analysis, and understanding at this stage, the student consumers demonstrate continual experimentation with their identity, using apparel that is perceived to be culturally authentic in the sub-brand and the wider university as a signifier of the identity that they aspire to and imitate more established members to fit in (Donnelly & Young 1988). Featherstone's work, (1991, p. 63), also helps to describe what is happening for many of the student consumers at the initial purchase stage. He suggests that the tendency is for social groups to seek to classify and order their social circumstances and use cultural goods as means of demarcation, as communicators that establish boundaries between some people and build bridges with others e.g. wearing university sport apparel to construct a desired identity. Such a

focus on the social usages of cultural goods, at this stage the university sport apparel, to differentiate from the rest of the university but also using it to build a relationship with others, firmly directs attention to the practices of embodied persons who read off and necessarily have to make judgements about others by decoding the cultural signs which others practise, display and consume (Featherstone, 1995). While conceptualising the use of university sport branded apparel in the sub brand as a subculture is problematic, Bauman's (1988) conception of the "Neo-tribe" does appear to offer a useful interpretation of the group's activity. For example, the group engage in the collection of meaningful items, which Bauman (1988) defines as "neo-tribe paraphernalia" that serve as tangible representations of the student's membership to university sport or the general university. This "paraphernalia" not only serves to strengthen the group's emerging sense of a shared identity but also brings the group closer by comparing the shared interpretations of those within the group to those outside it and forms an alternative method for the social solidification of the university sport sub-brand.

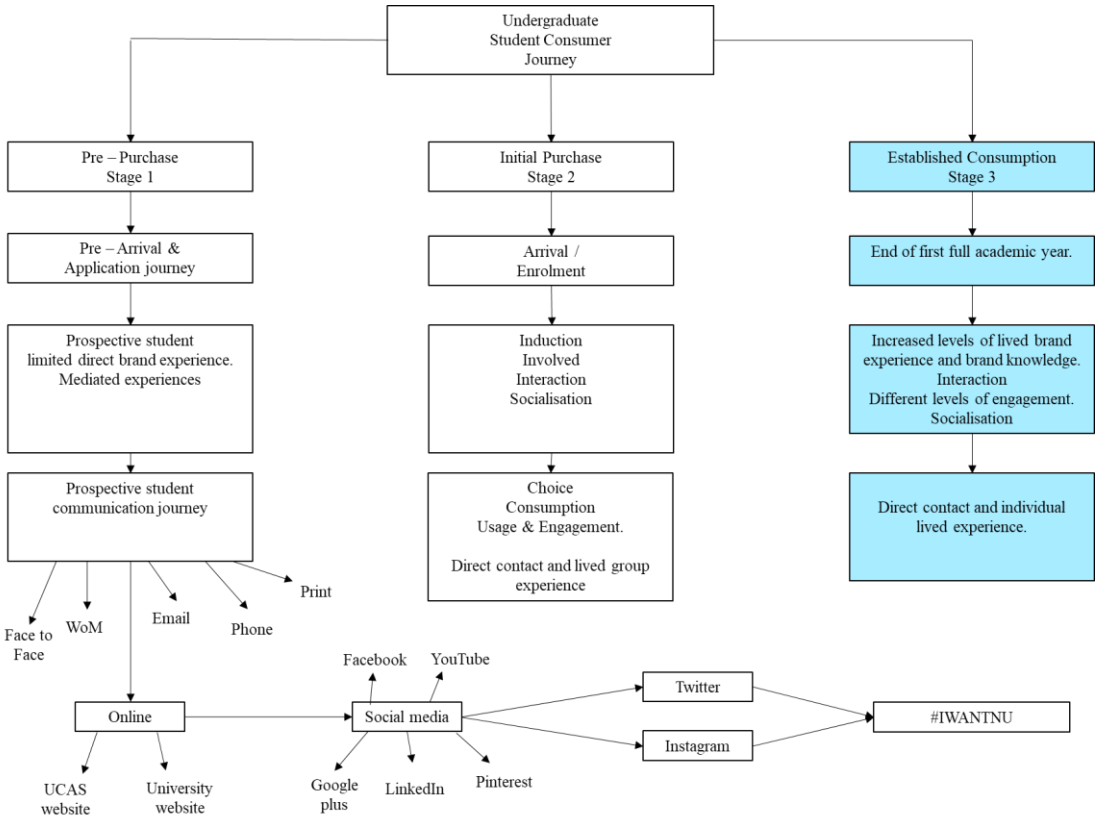
The initial-purchase stage of the student consumer journey sought to explore the arrival conceptions of the university brand and establish whether brand meaning existed at this stage. Findings demonstrate that brand meaning is fragmented at this stage, student consumers made sense of university brand meaning according to their different personal perceptions, social networks and brand knowledge. However, similar to the pre-purchase stage, establishing social groups emerged as a priority for the student consumers at this stage and the motivation for this was more explicit and therefore demonstrated deeper levels of meaning. This was illustrated through student consumer perceptions of the university sport sub-brand and the use of university sport apparel to create an identity. Therefore, the findings at this stage illustrate the gradual

formation of student consumer tribes and communities, these are in continuous engagement between the market, the brand and the student consumers, brand meanings are experienced and negotiated within these groups and communities and the findings clearly shows this.

Having considered the findings from the initial-purchase stage of the student consumer journey and demonstrating that brand meaning is emerging as a constant iteration between student consumers, the brand and the market on a longitudinal journey an additional study was required further along the student consumer journey to explore further the changing individual subjective realities of the student consumers and their co-creation of brand meaning.

4.3 Part 3 – The Established Consumption Stage

Figure 16: Student consumer journey communication framework for the established consumption stage



The pre-purchase stage of the undergraduate student consumer journey explored the pre-arrival perceptions of the university brand, the focus of the thesis then moved to the arrival/purchase stage of the student consumer journey to map the evolving student consumer experiences and brand meaning. What has emerged from stages one and two of the student consumer journey is an emphasis on peer-to-peer relationship building and a motivation for the student consumers to construct a desired identity. Particularly, at stage two of the journey a fragmented population illustrated how cultural knowledge of the brand is re-produced and appropriated to the student consumers' own pursuits, this emerges within the interactions of a sub-brand community. Furthermore, these personal pursuits have revealed a need to explore perceptions and meaning making at an individual level. Therefore, an exploration of a further stage (the established consumption stage) was sought to explore these evolving brand experiences and how they influence individual student consumers brand meaning in the HE environment. As such, interviews took place a year into the student consumer journey, i.e. the end of their first full year, allowing time for participants to experience the brand and gather further brand knowledge.

4.3.1 Shattering Modernist Structures: Lived Experience of Brand Shaping Brand Meanings and Attachment

So far, the student consumer journey has revealed the co-creation perspective that proposes that culturally shared meaning is adapted by individuals according to their unique circumstances. The interplay of these shared and individual meanings has been demonstrated through the changing student consumer subjective realities because of their lived experience with the brand. This is because the findings show that formation of and experience within student communities is central to a commemoration of the

brand and co-creation of brand meaning, rather than brand mediated production of cultural knowledge. This sheds light on a postmodern reality, that is, the brand is multi-layered, with a number of meanings and open to diversions (Cova, 1996). As highlighted in Chapter 3, an important part of the early stages of the interviews was to establish the student consumers' understanding of marketing (see Table 5 for definitions in Chapter 3). Further along the interviews it was also important to explore what student consumers' thoughts were on branding and whether that differed from their initial thoughts on marketing. Relatedly, exploring the individual interpretative strategies and the commonalities that connect the student consumers, as well as the contradictory separations between those interpretative strategies, was a focus of the interviews. The student consumers responded to the marketing question with branding examples, specifically drawing upon the logo when asked to contextualise this information. They were also asked to reflect on whether they thought the university was a brand prior to starting. Table 7 illustrates student consumer's reflections of university branding prior to starting at the university:

Quote	Participant
"I'd say it's maybe more of an organisation rather than a brand"	A
"I didn't see it as a brand"	B
"So there is the whole cost, and I think it's the money aspect that makes me realise they are businesses. but I think people associate brands with just like more what you see on the high street, and stuff, if you see what I mean"	CA
"No, I'd just say it was just a university"	CO
"I don't think I'd see it as a company. I think university is more like something you choose where you want to go"	JA
"No, I don't really see it as a brand. As a brand, I think Team Northumbria are probably stronger".	M
"No, not really. I think the universities, I never really saw them as brands at that time".	JO

Table 7: Student consumers' reflections of university branding prior to starting at the university.

In contrast to what the analysis and interpretation of student consumer actions/behaviours has demonstrated at the pre-purchase stage and the initial purchase stage, the participants at this stage are still explicitly stating that they did not assign meaning to the university as a brand prior to starting when asked if they regarded the university as a brand prior to starting. These findings are consistent with service marketing scholars who have highlighted that service brands face the challenge of developing an image and reputation to attract consumers before the service brand has been experienced (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Furthermore, whilst it is generally accepted in the product branding literature that meaning and value are created prior to purchase (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Levy, 1959; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000a & b, 2004; Vargo & Lusch 2004a & b, 2008), in services, the consumers are integrated in the production process where the service provider and

consumer mutually co-create the value. Therefore, consumers play a central role in the complete meaning making process, they are no longer merely the end user. In addition, higher education is an even more complex service. This is due in part to the type of contact and relationship between the consumer (student) and service provider (higher education brand) (Khanna et al., 2014) which creates inherent difficulties when attempting to differentiate the university service offering from competitors (Chapleo, 2007; 2015, Dall'Olmo Riley & De Chernatony, 2000; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Sharp & Dawes, 2001). Nevertheless, the student consumer responses in this study provide an insight into the importance of the brand lived experience for brand meaning in services:

(JA): "*Specifically, there probably was some marketing for others, but I just wasn't interested in it… I don't think I'd see it as a company. I think university's more like something you choose where you want to go, they shouldn't have to market towards you. That's why I quite liked it when I came here and they were more looking at the course that suited me rather than coming here. Whereas when I went to other places like Leeds, Loughborough, they wanted you to go there, they were marketing the university only, like they didn't have the students' best interests at heart. I think…*"

With reference to the mediated and lived experiences, the struggle of negotiation between sources, the texts and its readers/audience (Fish, 1980; Scott, 1994) is further illustrated. In postmodern society, readers are now recognised as possessing resourceful and active skills (Fiske, 2004; Ritson & Elliott, 1999). However, as the student consumer journey has demonstrated so far, a multiplicity of meanings emerge which are not conclusive. Meanings remain tentative and in order for these meanings to evolve, the student consumers have illustrated the need to valorise meanings through the lived experience of the brand. The struggle of negotiation is not only revealed through making sense of the mediate and lived experiences but also the contradictions the student consumers discuss:

(CO): *"I knew the prices of the university when I came. I did know about them yeah, I did make a fully aware purchase if you like of my university. And do I think it's worth it is a different question. I think that 9,000 for 9 hours a week and you know, the assessment that we do, I think that to do a poster as 100% of a module I think that's, to a certain extent a bit of a piss take to a certain extent, do you know what I mean, like you're paying…"*

As well as highlighting the university's use of market driven activity, rather than a consumer driven focus, this also sheds some light on the contradicting behaviours in the HE environment. That is, a sense of prevailing frustration and dissatisfaction with the cost of tuition yet at the same time still deciding to consume and enrol at the university. A reminder of Temple's example of Rolex and brand meaning is useful to explain this point: Rolex is expensive; does Rolex make high-quality watches? Probably, does it matter? Probably not, as people would buy them anyway, this argument exists, because of the strength of the brand (Temple, 2006). Therefore, a similar theme has emerged on the student consumer journey, the student consumers were aware of the cost of tuition, perceived it to be expensive but enrolled anyway, signifying some existence of brand meaning for HE as a product class as a whole, prior to purchase.

The findings also challenge modernist practices in higher education marketing, specifically, the traditional views of marketing the university is adopting which are outdated and present significant issues for universities communication to postmodern consumers. This is problematic because in a postmodern era the decentralisation of social structures and relations has contributed to student consumers becoming de-centred into fragmented entities. This creates openings for juxtapositions of opposites in shaping brand meaning, rather than being shaped by traditional group membership, practice and discourses (Featherstone, 1991; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) that hold a relatively fixed meaning thus, representing a particular social category or identity

(Brown, 1995; Elliott, 1999). As such, in a postmodern society, the contradictions and differences that are fundamental to the co-creation of meaning are commonplace (Holt, 2002). Relatedly, the student consumer groups once again emerge important for brand meaning. That is, the peer informed socialisation process, which has been demonstrated so far on the journey, helps the individual student consumer to co-create meaning. This means only by dealing with the processes of juxtapositions (e.g. comparing and contrasting the values and beliefs of the student consumer culture with the perceived signs from the HE brand) can it be understood how student consumers employ interpretation strategies to appropriate, negotiate and construct signs and their attached meanings regarding the university brand. A good example of this from the data emerged when student consumers were discussing their contrasting views on marketing and promotion of the university:

(CA): *"I think it was because Northumbria stuck in my head so much, and they really sold themselves well…I think it's probably a good idea, because all the ads on social media, like there is a lot of Northumbria. I don't know if you ever saw them? Just say it's an ad on social media, it's kind of just there for you, and it's given to you without you having to go dig for information about the uni."*

This contradiction highlights a preference for a specific mode of communication that is perceived as successful for promoting to them individually, yet this mode of communication, was previously criticised in stage two (the initial purchase stage). This illustrates further the multiple realities that co-exist in the HE environment as the co-creation process is tugged between resources in a network of associations. Consequently, in contemporary consumer society, the postmodern conditions accept the possibility of opting for multiple interpretations of a phenomenon which maybe in direct conflict with one another, demonstrated in the types of contradictions explored at this stage. This multiplicity of ideas surrounding university marketing corresponds

to the heterogeneity of identities representative of postmodern consumer society, in which postmodern consumers live in a fluid and less stable set of conditions and therefore consumerism can explore this contradiction (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Subsequently, the use of contradicting interpretations offers enrichment in the presentation of the student consumer experiences and university brand meaning. Hence, using a postmodern perspective to explore student consumer experiences in this thesis has helped to avoid 'manageable heterogeneity', a process which forces complex, individualistic buyer behaviour into generic segments (Brown, 1995) a process which is difficult to achieve in a market such as HE. Therefore, in a culture of fragmentation where the student consumers so far on their consumer journey appear to be neither committed nor captivated by a single narrative, this fragmentation has rendered traditional approaches to market segmentation less useful (Firat & Schultz, 1997). Instead, a jigsaw collage of multiple representations of selves and preferences have been demonstrated on the student consumer journey, therefore in postmodern society consumers seek products representing the images that are representative of selves (Firat & Schultz, 1997; Prus, 1997). As such, discussion developed during the interviews by exploring the student consumer's processes of distinguishing a product or service from others.

In line with the evolving culturally constituted market knowledge the student consumers illustrated across the journey, the importance of differentiation within the marketing activity of universities was highlighted:

(M): *"I think it is quite important because there are so many unis out there. If you can come up with something a little bit different, people are more likely to come and look".*

Student consumers' lived experience with the brand contributed to a more detailed understanding of differentiation and how it shaped the brand meaning:

(CO): *"And I think elite universities like your Loughborough's, your Oxford's and your Cambridge's, they don't need to market, I personally don't think they do because the prestige about them is already there, everyone knows who Oxford is, everyone knows who… maybe not Loughborough, but everybody knows who Oxford and Cambridge are. Not necessarily everyone like North… Northumbria is in that awkward middle phase you know, it's getting there but it's not there yet so you probably need a little bit more marketing to get the name fully out here. A lot of times when I spoke to people who are not from the north east, you say, "Northumbria", they go, "Where's that?" because if you say, "Newcastle" they know exactly…".*

This is a good example of how the postmodern education brand is co-created throughout the longitudinal journey of the student consumer as a result of the lived experience of the student consumer with the university and the market. That is, he explains everyone knows who Oxford and Cambridge are, but only through his experiences of explaining the identity of the university does meaning emerge for the student consumer. It also demonstrates fragmentation in the student population as this contradicts the student consumer whose friend considers they are 'lucky' to be accepted by the university in the previous stage, Additionally, when probed a little further about the types of marketing information used to inform their decision making about coming to the university, one participant suggested (E): *"I don't know. It is quite highly ranked in terms of the Law. No one really knows about it though".* These discussions on differentiation and challenges curating a clear positioning for the university within the market highlight that brands subsume meaning at different levels (Batey, 2008; 2015) in the HE environment. The thoughts of Simmel once again emerge useful for interpreting the different levels of brand meaning in HE. Simmel (2010) views objective culture as having an effect on the individual, but at the same time considers how this alters the development of the individual. For example, on the

student consumer journey, there have been a wealth of examples demonstrating how the individual uses interactions to develop meaning in context, that is, how the student consumer interacts with other student consumers, and how these interactions form the brands meaning. At the pre-purchase stage of the journey users building upon each other's narrative in the hashtag community demonstrated this. At the initial purchase stage this was demonstrated by student consumers' lived experience with the university sport sub-brand to create a desired identity and meaning at this stage of the journey. The established consumption stage illustrates the changing subjective nature of the student consumer reality was realised by one participant when he navigated his way through describing the university brand identity to outsiders in relation to other 'well known' university brands. However, these examples are not just examples of objective culture, they also demonstrate culturally created meanings stemming from thoughts shared by members of the university brand, as well as the evolving individual meaning which is formed as a result of personal subjective experiences with the brand. Thus, 'Society' for Simmel (1908; 1992 cited in Frisby, 2011, p. 33) is social interaction among persons *"continuously making connections and breaking them off and making them again, a perpetual flowing and pulsing that unites individuals, even when it does not amount to actual organization"*. Accordingly, university brand meaning in the postmodern era, then, is a sum of its interacting parts – rather than seeking to find a whole (see Figure 17 A hermeneutic spiral of brand meaning in HE).

Consistent with the postmodern fragmentation that has been demonstrated so far on the student consumer journey, sub-brands continue to materialise as a powerful articulation of the university brand meaning. As student consumers appropriate various kinds of symbolic resources from their everyday lived interactions through

university brand, and also contribute, extend and reproduce symbolic resources in the practices of group socialisation (Thompson, 1997).

4.3.2 The Evolving Role of the Sub-brand Community and Meaning Co-creation

The previously mentioned levels of brand meaning emerged throughout the interviews at this stage of the journey, most notably embedded in discussions in the sub-brand community relating to objective structures e.g. logo, positioning, subcultural values of the sub brand the individual subjective change realities of the student consumers. While Simmel was concerned with the negative effect of objective culture, he did suggest it is possible for identities to develop within these conditions (Farganis, 1993). Student consumers evidenced this when asked about what they thought the university represented, demonstrating a clear identity using the university sport sub-brand to respond to the question (B): *"I look at it as a different brand because it's got the word 'team' in the title".* Discussion for another participant then progressed to preference of brand alignment (CO): *"See that's a tough a question because I favour TN brand over the Northumbria brand, but I am more, at the minute I'm more associated to the Northumbria brand because I prioritise my education, but I personally favour the TN brand over Northumbria brand if that makes sense".* For this participant the main university brand is directly related to education but it is the sub-brand attachment, which is stronger in terms of brand meaning, implying that he perceives education as a right and sport is something to be consumed. This idea that sport is something to be consumed was reflected by others:

(CA): *"Because it's like, even it's got a different logo. It's like… it's got its own different social media page that aren't connected to the -- I feel like Team Northumbria is a brand, but I feel like the actual uni isn't, if you know what I mean. It just seems completely disconnected from the uni, if you get me, even like just because it does have a different logo and stuff. I feel like the logo does justice, like does*

everything for it because if it didn't have a separate logo I wouldn't really see it as -- it just has everything separate from the uni. It's not a bad thing, but it kind of disconnects it from the uni a little bit".

The focus on responses such as *'a different brand'*, '*I favour TN brand over the Northumbria brand',* '*even it's got a different logo', 'I feel like Team Northumbria is a brand, but I feel like the actual uni isn't'* are clearly synonymous with what Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) call brand architecture and what they describe as a sub-brand co-driver. In this example, the sub-brand (university sport) appears to generate a stronger affiliation with the student consumers largely because the university at the time (see Appendix E) had adopted a sport cultural strategy (Holt, 2002). Furthermore, one participant provided a very succinct description of a brand architecture framework, applied to the university's services/programmes and the management (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007) of what is effectively know as a 'sub-brand':

(M): *"I think, maybe Team Northumbria is like a separate brand but it also is a brand that comes under the uni brand, because the uni brand is obviously the bigger one. Then when you come to open days and things they mention TN as something separate to the rest of the university, like, values and things. Yeah, I think before you even start you've heard of TN and you know TN is a separate kind of thing. But also, they're their own franchise, aren't they? Team Northumbria Super League team…As a brand, I think Team Northumbria are probably stronger".*

Chapleo (2015) claims that at a theoretical level, brand architecture approaches do not appear to 'fit' with the characteristics of a university, moreover, Spry, Foster, Pich and Peart, (2018) suggest the brand architecture framework can provide valuable insights into university brand strategies acknowledging the complexities of multiple stakeholders and most importantly sub-cultures within a university's brand. Its application to this study has generated useful insight, specifically relating to the intermediating role of the student consumer groups (e.g. university sport sub-brand)

in shaping the student consumer brand experience. As one interviewee compared his experience and perceptions of the university brand structure to a point he made previously about Adidas originals (JO): *"Yeah. Almost like the Adidas Originals. It is (University sport) almost a selling point, something that people see that maybe attracts them to Northumbria or the other way around, so it's…"* While the actual context of the consumption activity varied, he alluded to the possibility of the sub-brand owning considerable potential to affect the associations of the master brand and even become the driver (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000) through *"it is almost a selling point"*. Chapleo (2015, pp. 157-158) suggested that parts of the university actually displayed many qualities of *"sub brand descriptors,"* where they utilise the master brand profile but make that brand more credible for a specific target audience (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). This reference to targeting different segments is a common role of a sub-brand (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000) and was also implicit in other interviewees' accounts (CA): *"I'd say it's stronger if you go here, or if you live in Newcastle. I wouldn't say it's stronger for an outsider because I didn't know anything about it before I came here".* Therefore, what can be extrapolated from this is that the university possesses a strong offering in the university sport sub-brand, however, this is not always being leveraged because, as this participant suggests, a certain level of brand knowledge is required, as well as immersion in the context before student consumers give meaning to the sub-brand. The importance of this student consumer experience with the brand and only assigning meaning to the part of the brand they experience was previously highlighted in discussions on Berry's (2000) service branding model that suggested, customer experience with the company/brand has the most influential impact on brand meaning. This is because insight into the shared interpretation of the members' (insiders') meanings can only be derived this way. Yet,

even when discussing the strength of the sub-brand, which has generally been conceptualised in a much clearer manner than the main university brand, contradictions emerged (CO): *"I kind of… no, I don't associate TN that much different from Northumbria, I just put Northumbria under one big bracket".* And contradicts himself with *"I was going to say that the TN sport, TN sport is… I'd say it's probably a bigger brand than the actual Northumbria University thing as well".* What this contradiction represents is a clear example of the student consumer's enculturation journey. This is because as the student consumer learns more about the brand, they are able to explain what is important to them and their meaning making, thus it becomes his tribe, moving away from the main university brand into smaller tribes, in this student consumer's example, sport being the tribe. This also challenges the previously described brand architecture examples, in which some student consumers were able to provide a very succinct overview of how they perceived their own alignment with the university and university sport, they accurately explained a brand architecture relationship. Yet, others provided further support for an ambiguous brand. While it was discussed in previous sections that there appears to be instances of both brand community and tribal behaviour demonstrated, at this stage this finding can be explained further. That is, while some studies of brand communities would typically describe the main university brand as a brand community, in this study the main university brand is made up of multiple tribes that congregate around smaller student consumer groups and sub-brand communities, these are the groups that are providing meaning for the university. This demonstrates the nature of postmodern consumer culture in higher education.

Both these views illustrate the co-existence within a given community of a variety of sub-tribes allocating different meanings to a particular brand (Cova & Badot, 1995).

There is clear distinction illustrated regarding how students engage with the brand, specifically which features of the brand. Consistent with postmodern conditions and the possibility for multiple identities, the strength of the sub-brand described by participants suggests the sub brand might be a better way for student consumers to experience the brand to build their identity. As such, the student communities that make up the university brand (in this thesis, sport) play a vital role in shaping brand image and social attachment in the HE environment. This is because the primary community marker of a brand is 'consciousness of kind' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), which describes the perceived membership of participants and intersects with building an identity as members feel connected with other members, and separate themselves from outsiders (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). Members, therefore, often derive a feeling of belonging from their membership of the brand community (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). They identify similarities with other members of the same group and differences to members of other groups (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). However, as most student consumers at this stage are unclear about what the university brand stands for, it is difficult to conceptualise a true brand community for the university brand, therefore student consumers in this study are using the university sport sub-brand to achieve this. This is also supported by the more recent customer engagement literature (Brodie et al, 2011; 2013; Hollebeek et al, 2019) which suggests central to the fluctuating intensity of brand experiences this is the notion of interactivity between focal engagement subject(s) and object(s), in the current study this helps to describe how the student consumers feel more at ease using the sport sub-brand as a focal point to construct a desired identity.

The intermediating role in creating meaning for the student consumers has resulted in a combination of tribal and brand community behaviour being displayed by the student

consumers at different stages of the journey. This is because, although there are clear markers of a brand community demonstrated, it is the sub-brand community to which the student consumers feel a sense of belonging and attachment through their lived experiences. This fragmentation demonstrates that some do not want to be part of the main university brand but feel more at ease with interaction and localised discourse that guides identity construction in the sub-brand community. Nevertheless, to negotiate brand meaning is to engage in discourse (deliberately or unintentionally) related to a brand's identity (see Klein, 1999). Hence, the university sport sub-brand is part of the university brand and therefore must have implicit meaning to the participants who discuss their strong affiliations with the university sport sub brand.

Further endorsement of this implicit brand meaning is demonstrated through student consumers' descriptions relating to their lived experience with the university sport brand community. Although earlier on in the interviews the student consumers were asked to recall their mediated experiences via the contextualisation of university marketing examples (most of the examples being explicit forms of advertising described), it was their descriptions relating to the university sport sub-brand that revealed insider cultural awareness:

(JA): *"I'd say it would, but I think within it it's got loads of different communities with it being like you've got people that do sport, you've got potentially your international students. Yeah, because Team Northumbria has so many things stemming off from it, you've got your Team Northumbria rugby, you've got Team Northumbria netball, but Team Northumbria netball is in the Super League, so loads of people will support Team Northumbria but that doesn't mean they're supporting the university at the same time".*

(K): *"I think that's how it's perceived that it's something different to being just from the university. Because they've done it as how they said, it it's not just you're playing for Northumbria sport, it's Team Northumbria. So the people that are representing Team Northumbria are all set together in one brand themselves, and then you've got the whole university as a whole".*

These excerpts demonstrate how the student consumers negotiate everyday activities meaningfully in order to narrate their identity projects and to locate themselves in their culturally constituted worlds (Giddens, 2013). Student consumers achieve this by revealing that the same sense of community they experience in the university sport brand community they do not experience at a university wide level i.e. sport as a sub-brand reduces the enormity of what the student consumers have to interpret to co-create meaning. Nevertheless, the earlier stages demonstrate how brand meaning co-creation begins to form at the initial stages of the journey, whereas at this stage, co-creation of meaning is more deeply embedded in the everyday student experience of the brand. Through a plurality of social interactions, the student consumers via their membership with others co-create, communicate and negotiate a variety of symbolic forms that constitute meaning in the sub-brand community rather than for the university as a whole.

Clearly, the university sub-brand is a symbolic, cultural focal point for the student consumer collective (O'Reilly, 2012). Originally defined as small-scale community solutions to unfavourable and alienating living conditions (Canniford, 2011), sub-cultures of consumption has been a useful term in the literature to describe such group activity. But, in the current thesis this activity would not be recognised as truly subcultural as the use of the university sport sub-brand is not held together by typical consumption activities or as a response to some sort of rebellion (Belk & Costa, 1998; Kates, 2002a; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Instead, what is happening in HE postmodern consumer culture is the student consumer tribes flow between these sub-brands in a temporal manner depending on socialisation developments to facilitate meaning co-creation. Therefore, similar to the behaviour

demonstrated in the focus groups, Maffesoli (1995) and Bauman's (1988) 'neo-tribes' seems a more appropriate theoretical concept of the empirical example demonstrated. Bauman (1992) argues that subcultures may no longer exist in the form that they once did, it is no longer possible to identify visible and coherent movements and in postmodern society, certain aspects of life have become less significant in an increasingly unstable and fluid culture. This fluid culture captures the collective identification of the university sport sub-brand, through a sense of shared beliefs and feelings but not of shared obligation or moral responsibility; they are friendship groups, built on sociality rather than a focal point of a brand. That being said, findings have demonstrated evidence of both tribal and brand community behaviour, e.g. tribe for the university main brand and sub-brand as a brand community. These concepts that are vital for analysing the postmodern consumer culture in HE. This is because unknowingly to the student consumer, the university brand has facilitated the student consumers in getting into the social groups they describe as being vital to their socialisation; as such, it is an inherent part of the university branding. Therefore, it is the main university brand that facilitates joining neo-tribes, e.g. join the university sport brand if they wish, but only after they have joined the main university brand. Therefore, in the HE environment instead of these competing theories existing on a disparate continuum they sit together and allow student consumers to be part of a network of individuals gathering homogeneously rather than what typically happens in postmodernity where a move away from individuals to communities is encouraged (Simmons, 2008). What has also been demonstrated by the adoption of both tribes and brand communities in this thesis is that because of the subjective nature of meaning, actions from the student consumers can lead to the co-creation of value in different ways. As such, student consumers seek to find meaning in the neo tribes and also the

brand community, this is because neo-tribes are "communities of feeling" (Hetherington 1998, p. 49), this aligns with identity as primarily an issue of wanting to belong.

4.3.3 The Influence of Individual, Collective and Brand Identity Construction on Brand Meaning Co-creation.

The neo-tribal concept developed further at this stage of the journey, as the student consumers experience the brand at a different level and engage with different aspects of the brand due to their iterative brand experience and changing realities. Tied to this and the ritualistic consumer behaviour which was emerging in the university sport sub-brand community at the second stage of the journey, is again the idea of what Bauman (1988) defines as 'neo-tribe paraphernalia' that serve as tangible representations of the student consumer's membership of the sub-brand community. What this represents in practice is an emerging theme of how the student consumers search for tangible marketplace resources to facilitate their meaning co-creation for the sub-brand. This is because in the service brand environment conspicuous consumption is difficult to display due to the lack of tangibility that represents the consumption act. The following narratives from the student consumers who were part of the university sport community revealed how the influence of university sport branded apparel informed their meaning-making and identity construction:

(CO): *"not many people are wearing it and instantly it's recognisable, that's the thing, as soon… if you spot someone with a training t-shirt and walking down there you immediately know they're part of Team Northumbria which is… I kind of like that, I like that because that… well you can recognise it can't you, So if they're wearing that t-shirt you must be thinking, "Yeah, they're pretty good at sport", and obviously I'm into sport so I think respect to a level. Well I think it looks pretty cool and it feels pretty… does it feel elitist? I feel like it carries a weight to it to a certain extent".*

(JA): *"So I think that's just a thing that says you're part of the uni, but then also you get probably some people that would feel as though maybe in a sense would look down*

on other people because they've got the TN stuff and other people haven't, yeah, I guess".

(M): *"Before you trial for TN and things, if you see someone wearing a TN you're like… I picture them in my head as having a higher status than yourself".*

(K): *"I'll use it as bragging rights, especially… maybe not as much now because it's obviously you know who's in what, but at the start when they (his friends) were in awe of the TN stuff".*

Of course, in a neo-tribal sense, group membership is key to understanding the sense of positive distinctiveness or differentiation the individual gains from being in a group (Moufahim, Wells, & Canniford, 2018; O'Reilly, 2012) and in this study insights from Simmel's work help to explain how the student consumer's identity creation provides further meaning in the sub-brand community. He indicates that we may differentiate forms in diachronic terms, giving rise to 'preliminary', 'objective' and 'world' levels (Weingartner, 1959, pp. 46–47), such an approach may be utilised to further explore the influence and evolution of the student consumers identity co-creation through apparel at this stage of the student consumer journey. Student consumers can, to some extent, be distinctly individual, but only in the sense that everybody else is being an individual in the same ways (Simmel, 1957). In effect, the structural influence of fashion, (e.g. the university apparel in the HE environment), illustrates the complex interplay that exists between social experiences (interaction) and how experiences free the individual of responsibility. Likewise, Veblen (1994) describes how individuals of the leisure class employ their knowledge to conspicuously consume apparel that signifies social and self-symbolic meanings. Both Simmel (1903; 1957) and Veblen (1899; 1994) reveal the interpretive strategies employed by consumers to construct identity and apparel meaning, they also link these strategies to consumer identity

project desires, which motivate the consumers to learn how to use apparel (Holt, 2004).

These ideas are valuable for explaining student consumers' apparel use in the HE environment. This is because as brand experiences keep evolving, so do the subjective realities of the student consumers and their brand meaning making. In its preliminary form apparel was used by the student consumers in the pre-purchase stage to demonstrate a sense of distinctiveness. The student consumers utilised the free hooded jumper to curate a specific identity in an attempt to establish social networks and evidence they were part of the university. Second, in the initial purchase stage of the journey, the student consumers began to appreciate the benefits associated with the university sport apparel. Student consumers at this stage started to understand that if they accessed the university sport apparel they themselves would be able to send a variety of cultural signals throughout the marketplace that turn them into representations of aspiration. In addition to this, Crane (2012, p. 1) suggests that clothing *"as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity"*. The use of marketplace resources has served as a useful identifier of student consumers' involvement with the brand and revealed some of their identity motivations. That is, student consumers have illustrated they need marketplace objects to co-create value with other student consumers. What has also been demonstrated is that different student consumers at different levels of consumption (e.g. both low and high involvement at different stages of the journey) can co-create value in different ways (Kozinets, 1999; Mathwick et al., 2008). For example, tribal rituals, norms and narratives became prominent among highly involved student consumers in this stage not just to create different identities under different circumstances but also to share resources (knowledge/experiences) with

other student consumers in ways that adds to the resources available to groups as a whole. In the current study, this includes what Simmel describes as 'fashion' developing the sub-brand community, e.g. fashion can be considered to be part of objective culture in that it allows the individual to come into conformity with norms of the group, that is, the highly involved student consumer uses the sport sub-brand community apparel as a tribal resource to achieve this process. Not only does this further endorse the reliance on using tangible goods to generate brand meaning for the student consumers, but it also provides distinction from individuals who are not part of that and/or do not understand its meanings.

This process is demonstrated across the student consumer journey as a continuous learning process within a network of associations, whereby the student consumers receive benefits through engaging, educating and enriching the brand experience iteratively. This behaviour is demonstrable of what the customer engagement literature (Hollebeek, & Macky, 2019) would describe as a highly engaged consumer i.e. brand-related interactions, student consumer generated communication and a changing environment. Importantly, the findings from this study also demonstrate that low-level involved student consumers can also co-create value, but in different ways to highly involved members. For example, some student consumers said they would buy the university sport apparel even if they were not part of any sport team, Simmel would suggest these low involvement student consumers understand that apparel "*intensifies a multiplicity of social relations, increases the rate of social mobility and permits individuals from lower strata to become conscious of the styles and fashions of upper classes*" (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005, p. 326).

Therefore, learning the rules of socialisation and thus identity construction results in student consumers acquiring new symbolic resources and ideas with which to advance

their own identity, even if they do not have experiences to understand the insider meanings. Consequently, at the second stage of the student consumer journey through socialisation and constant comparison with group members, student consumers demonstrated an emerging awareness regarding the symbolic and hedonic characteristics (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985) of university sport apparel as they moved along the subconscious and conscious brand awareness continuum, at the third stage they experienced the brand at a different level and were using apparel to explicitly demonstrate their socialisation into the university sport sub-brand community:

(CO): *Well just again, because it looks cool and I think that you know, when I rock up to training in TN stuff it's kind of like been there, done that kind of thing, do you know what I mean, been there, done that, got the t-shirt to a certain extent.*

(E): *Yeah, I definitely wore the free jumper more before I joined the team than now. I just don't even bother wearing it now because I've got other stuff to wear, and I prefer to wear the sports stuff.*

Therefore, the student consumers moved from a preliminary to a more objective social form when they acquired, and consciously attempted to evolve, their identity through the use of university sport apparel rather than the free hooded jumper provided by the university. Consequently, through awareness of the university sub-brand community and the apparel that represents this, some student consumers at the third stage of the journey (the more established consumption stage) have approached the heuristic model of a world form. First, the university sport sub-brand is viewed as an important representative element of the university, not only with student consumers who play or study university sport but also with student consumers who are not part of this community, yet are emotionally invested in the sub-brand. Second, it is clear from the interviewees' accounts in this third stage that student consumers who are part of the sport sub-brand attempt to convey a particular form of identity using university sport

apparel that is recognised and appreciated universally across the university. As a result of this a belief system has been built and well understood from an insider's perspective, this serves to organise student consumer experiences and to locate the human condition within a totalising world vision (Giulianotti, 2005; Simmel, 2010). What the student consumers are illustrating in this third study is a strong affiliation for the protective shield of the university sport brand, a demonstration Simmel might say of protecting themselves from *"the atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture"* (Simmel, 1971, p. 338). What this means is that the postmodern conditions of a consumer society e.g. hyppereal, loss of commitment and fragmentation, often leave contemporary individuals feeling overwhelmed (Van Raaij, 1993). This is represented in the behaviour of the student consumers in the university environment. The university brand as a whole is overwhelming, especially for the initiating student consumers, therefore they seek easily identifiable cues such as apparel and use this to initiate and then develop their meaning making with the institution:

(JA): *"I think it makes you a part of the uni, people kind of… because not everybody gets the jackets and stuff you have more of a sense of belonging and achievement I guess, people can recognise that you're involved in something other than just the university side of university".*

(M): *"I guess we all kind of looked the same and we were all getting involved". I love it. I'm a bit of a loser, I like to wear my jacket around! I think it's quite important for me, I really enjoy being part of the whole SNC [strength and conditioning] kind of thing.*

With a different student consumer demonstrating how tribes are born out of co-creation with a widely shared meaning:

(K): *"It differentiates you from a lot of people, but then it puts you together with a lot of people as well".*

In line with some of Simmel's thoughts on differentiation and reaching that higher world level of meaning, Verma (2013) suggests that brands, in their process of meaning cultivation, must break away from pure functionality to go on and embrace higher-order meaning. This brings about new insight for exploring brand meaning in HE, because the current study has demonstrated that for some student consumers the university sport brand has provided them with a clear identity, and this now brings meaning to the brand but for others this was not so explicit, prompting recommendations for the main university brand. Furthermore, this meaning was not so explicit in the earlier stages, specifically, even in the second stage of the journey, the initial purchase stage, when apparel comparison emerged as being important, but the benefits for identity construction were not truly realised. These emerged as the brand experience was contextualised within the sub-brand community and the student consumers made sense of this community. Therefore, a competing process of alignment and differentiation is demonstrated at this stage. In their quest to become socialised, student consumers on their journey have identified that apparel can be used as a resource to construct a desired identity in order to establish social groups that experience and represent the brand. In essence, these resources dominate the individual learning process and new knowledge emerges as new resources when student consumers interact and exchange their knowledge with each other (Blazevic & Lievens, 2008). What this has achieved is both alignment and differentiation from the main university brand. By using the university sport brand as something that was easily accessible through a symbolic identifier e.g. apparel, the student consumers have been able to establish a sense of affiliation with the university sport sub-brand but at the same time differentiate themselves from the main university brand. Thus,

the student consumers used the university sport brand in an attempt to understand the meaning of the vast university brand, because, essentially, university sport is a sub-brand of the university therefore if that has meaning then the university brand must have some meaning even at a subconscious level. However, further brand experience has evolved the student consumers' enculturation journey and as a result of this they now understand that within the university environment, different brands have different meaning e.g. the free university hooded jumper is not as good as a university sport hooded jumper. A hierarchical significance that also helps to layer the community. This is a good example of what Veblen (1899; 1994) views as the most important factor in determining consumer behaviour, conspicuous consumption. That is, each social class seeks to imitate the consumption behaviour and activities of the class above it, to such an extent that even the poorest people are subject to pressures to engage in conspicuous consumption. In this thesis, this is represented in the evolving use of apparel across the student consumer journey (rather than social class) and the significance of university apparel and its ability to create hierarchies amongst the novice and veteran student consumers. Further examples of this are even demonstrated in student consumers' discussions when they are not part of the university sport community yet still recognise this distinction:

(T): *"I think they like their uni, otherwise they wouldn't be wearing it. It also creates some imaginary feeling of belonging. Yeah, I think so, it's as if I have some connection with the uni".*

This imagined physical association to the community and how it is integral to constitution of self was an important theme within the interviews, specifically when some participants discussed purchasing the university sport apparel because of what it stands for even if they were not part of the university sport community:

(K): *"I probably would because it's, okay, it sounds really bad, but because it's a brand it's… and if I liked the look of it then there's no reason why I wouldn't buy it. Especially it's… it's quite a different type of material as well, the t-shirts; they're not like your t-shirt. So I would say I probably would because I'd still… let's say no-one would know that I didn't play for Team Northumbria, so I would still walk around the with image in my head that I did play for Team Northumbria, and if could tell myself that I did then it tells everyone else that I do as well so it wouldn't make a difference".*

When brands develop a community spirit similar to one described in the excerpt above, consumers meet and interact around the brand, consumer co-creation increases, consumers become more active and empowered players in the development of brands (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009), to the extent that they often co-create products and services with other consumers (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Hollebeek, & Macky, 2019). At this stage of the student consumer journey the university sub-brand is a good example of this in action. What was important to this particular student consumer was the need to provide the illusion of university sport group membership regardless of whether this has been earned or not. This is consistent with postmodern conditions that allow the self in postmodern society to play with identities.

University sport apparel and therefore the sub-brand community clearly has profound significance and symbolic meaning for the construction and signification of desired self-identity. Consistent with the fragmented identity motivations of postmodern consumers, this shows how individual creativity, and new social identities and projects can all change patterns of usage and identity design (Hodge & Kress, 1988). This imagined physical association to the university sport community strengthens further the student consumer's identity and at the core of community identification is an individual's desire to belong to a particular community and behave according to established norms and values (Heere et al., 2011). Within this desire, the search for a "social identity," to create and foster one's personal identity, is a valuable aspect of

such affiliations (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Durkheim, 1965; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Tajfel 1978). Therefore, this is used by the student consumers to co-create meaning through the university sport brand community, even though they perhaps have not reached the stage where they can explain what the main university brand means to them, they can explain what the sport sub-brand means. Further illustrations of this were discussed by other members of university sport teams:

(M): *"I've got the hoodie that you get when you accept your offer; I wore that quite a lot at the start! No, not as much now. Yeah, I'm here, part of it now. I feel that I don't really need to wear the hoodie to say that I'm here. I guess in the first month you're a true fresher, aren't you, if you've got your Northumbria 17 hoodie on, like walking around town and things. But now that's worn off, like, I feel more part of it now as a person so I feel like I don't really need to wear my stuff around".*

This student consumer illustrates the importance of rituals in the university apparel transition, providing an example of her enculturation journey. Furthermore, Veblen's (1994) ideas on hierarchy and levels of involvement are useful here. Veblen (1994) claims that something (apparel) at one time may confer status but may later be acquired by all and confer no status at all and therefore suggests individuals are obliged to always try and acquire new consumption goods in order to distinguish themselves from others (Trigg, 2001). For this to happen the individual needs to know what to wear and when, because for some, there is no purpose in wearing something if no one knows about it. Equally, if an individual dedicates a significant amount of time in constructing their desired identity around certain apparel in a cultural milieu, this identity could be lost if the rules of hierarchy are not learned. Therefore, at this stage the student consumers demonstrate knowledge of this social meaning and what is also of value for this study is further emphasis on their evolving identity and the competing theories of brand community and neo-tribes. Brand communities are shaped by markers such as rituals, traditions, shared group experiences (Muniz &

O'Guinn, 2001), but at the same time this example demonstrates these rituals are fleeting and temporary, they also fluctuate in intensity (Brodie et al, 2013). This ritual and identity evolution is also demonstrated not just between the university sport sub-brand and the main university brand but also within the sub-brand when one participant discusses the use of university sport apparel for student consumers in the second and final year:

(JA): *"I think you get a mix of people, because I think there's some people that… I've got a friend who's on TN and she I'd say wears her jacket, her full kit like she's proud to be wearing her kit. But you get other people that have been maybe on the TN for a while that just wear it like it's a normal thing…I think those that are the in first team that have played there for years I think they're not really that bothered, but I think freshers that have maybe got into high teams, maybe that's when they'll feel people… they're better than other people, because it's only very few freshers get on to the TN".*

This description, which includes reference to engagement intensity and the hierarchical development (e.g. some own the university sport apparel, some do not, those who do are encultured and have status) of initiation elements of the rituals in wearing the university sport branded apparel, represents a direct example of cultural capital. This exists in the university sport sub brand community and plays a role in the interpretation of university brand meaning. This is because this participant can be seen as embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Crossley, 2001) as she affirms her knowledge of what is appropriate to wear at different stages in the field of her university sport membership through the concept of 'earning' the right to wear. In her explanation, she also returns to the previously mentioned importance of status evolution (JA): *"But I think that's just like your first sense of belonging, achievement. But I think it's maybe decreased a little bit now, like I wouldn't find the need to take it home and show my parents because they've seen it, it's worn off a little bit".* These examples demonstrate that similar to the constantly evolving brand meaning on the student consumer journey, the search for status (Veblen, 1994) through consumption

is never ending, this is because as suggested previously what at one time may confer status may later be acquired by all and confer no status (Trigg, 2001). Thus, as the enculturation journey evolves the composition and hierarchies within groups get more complex and some objects lose their status as key signifiers of group membership and positions and are threatened with potential displacement. For example, the main university hooded jumper at one time was used as a cultural resource by membership of the hashtag community to demonstrate status in the pre-purchase stage of the journey, it now no longer holds such status as demonstrated by the student consumers enculturation journey (M): *"So I guess people that aren't involved in it look at you and kind of go, "Oh my god, showing off her TN jacket," but then I feel that are on TN all do the same, so everyone wears it. I guess when you're involved with the people on TN, everyone kind of looks the same and you're all like, "Yeah, that looks nice," but people that aren't might be like, "Oh, she's just showing off her kit"."*

What this means is that the symbolic resources available to the individual for the construction of identity can be distinguished as being either lived experiences or mediated (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998). Since many things the individual lives through, or encounters in their daily lives can be viewed as symbolic, the lived experience is important here (Wattanusuwan, 2005).

4.3.3.1 Identity Co-creation and the Role of Lived and Mediated Brand Experience

Individuals in their everyday lives continuously acquire, interpret, exchange, negotiate and reproduce vast symbolic resources from and through a diversity of social interactions and a variety of consumption activities in order to make sense of their social milieu (Wattanusuwan, 2005). Student consumers make frequent reference to their lived experiences at this stage of the journey, yet they also reflect on the perceptions of others and their mediated responses to what the university sport

community represents when wearing the apparel. Mediated experience is an outcome of a mass-communication culture and the consumption of media products and involves the ability to experience events that are spatially and temporally distant from the practical context of daily life (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998). In the university environment, the examples reveal how student consumers (outsiders) perceive the university sub-brand via the mediated display of apparel. These student consumers have not yet begun to experience the university sport brand, yet they have selectively drawn on their mediated experience to create this perception. Therefore, central to the postmodern consumer culture, this illustrates clearly that the life history and social situation of student consumers has led to differential valorisation of forms of experience, varying between those who value only lived experience and have little contact with mediated forms (student consumers who are part of the university sport sub-brand, the insiders), and others for whom mediated experience has become central to the project of the self and perceptions of others (student consumers who are not part of the university sport sub-brand) (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998). Student consumers who continuously live through mediated experiences perhaps experience difficulty in co-creating that higher order meaning required to make sense of the main university brand.

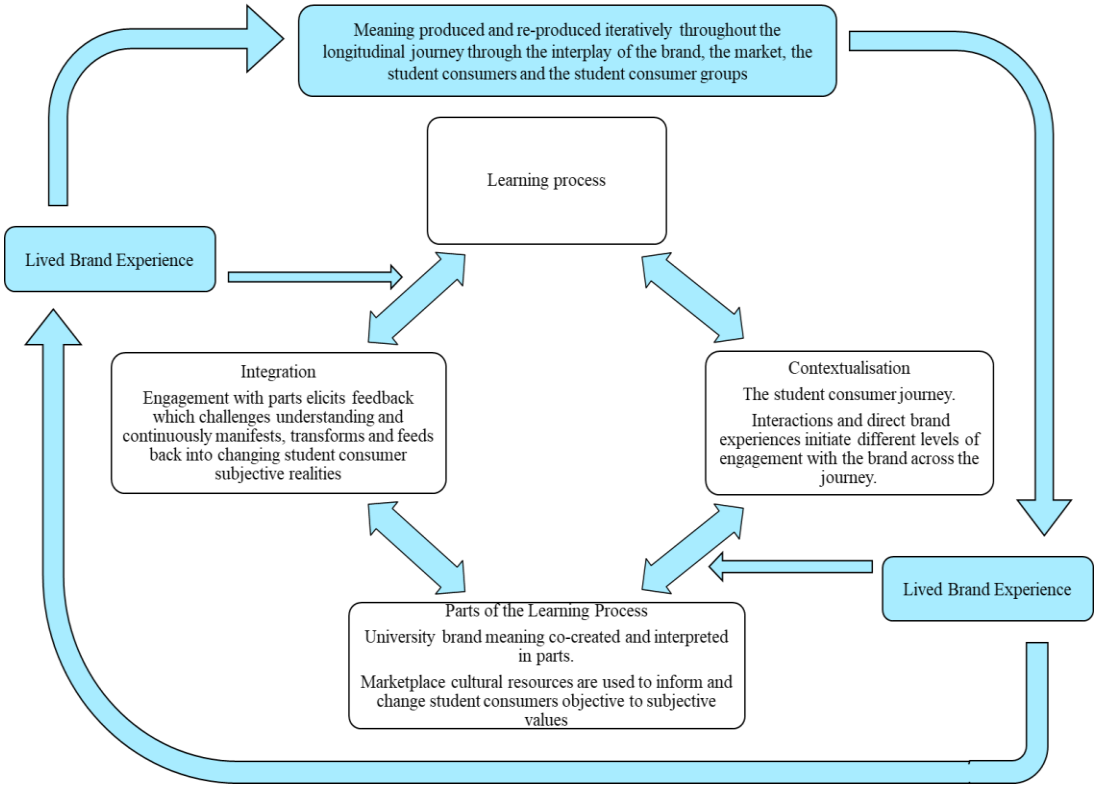
Identity motivations have undoubtedly played a vital part in student consumers' emerging brand awareness, differentiation strategies and brand meaning co-creation. Mapping identity evolution in this way has brought about new insights for brand meaning in HE. This is because members of the university sport community used the university sporting apparel as a semantic locus around which a shared, sociological identity could develop and therefore provide brand meaning. Through this process, the

appropriation of meanings in relation to apparel, identity construction and the brand meaning journey evolved, prior to this stage on the journey students were not able to clearly describe rich perceptions of branding. However, using the emic origins of branded apparel (illustrated with "conceptual exemplars" (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989, p. 150) taken from the transcripts) combined with an etic viewpoint (represented by the author's analysis and relevant theoretical references), these accounts represent a clear illustration of the student consumer's co-creation journey through the use of university branded apparel. In addition to this, identity evolution also demonstrates the process by which the student consumers learn the dynamics of their surrounding culture and acquire values and norms appropriate (Grusec & Davidov, 2015) for the university context to therefore become encultured and develop their brand meaning awareness.

4.3.4 Mapping the Student Consumer Journey and Brand Meaning – Evolution from Objective Culture to Subjective Values

Findings from this third stage, the established consumption stage, have enabled a clear mapping of the student consumers' journey and brand meaning co-creation through a hermeneutic spiral (see Figure 17 A hermeneutic spiral of brand meaning in HE). This has revealed the importance of the convergence of the market, the university brand, the student consumers and the role of student consumer groups and communities in co-creating brand meaning across the journey.

Figure 17: A hermeneutic spiral of brand meaning in HE



Brand meaning as a process is iterative. Through the lived experiences with the university brand, Figure 17 demonstrates that contexualisation on the student consumer journey is shaped by interactions between individuals, consumer groups and the university brand, relevant marketplace resources are also used to communicate meanings across the journey, these resources change throughout the learning process and this change feeds back into the student consumers socialisation and enculturation process. This results in brand meaning continuously transforming and manifesting in response to the student consumer changing subjective realities. The outer arrows display that the lived experience informs as well as draws from meanings, this then

informs future lived experiences. This section uses the framework from Figure 17 to illustrate in more detail how brand meaning is co-created on the student consumer journey. That is, discussion will highlight how the journey moves from the conscious rejection of university branding to the non-conscious elements of the journey, which have provided meaning e.g. the formation of student consumer groups and apparel evolution. The role of student consumers and their communities in transforming the brand experience is discussed, which leads to an exploration of individual meaning and identities that are experienced at a different level at this stage and the subjective values which emerge from this.

4.3.4.1 Objective Structures

As demonstrated earlier on in the journey at pre-purchase stage, student consumers were blind to some aspects of the brand such as its lived experience, but based their decision making on characteristics such as image, reputation, course, facilities. Therefore, though there is some level of brand experience and knowledge existing prior to enrolling, mapping the longitudinal journey has revealed that the lived brand experience is co-created iteratively within the ongoing interactions between student consumers, the markets and the brand. Consistent with the postmodern conditions illustrated throughout the student consumer journey, slight differences were present in discussion when the student consumers were asked if they perceived the university to be a brand:

(A): *"I'd say it's maybe more of an organisation rather than a brand, obviously it only appeals to one demographic, people that go to Northumbria University rather than Adidas is everywhere, like an international organisation".*

(B): *"No, I see it as a place for people to get involved in sport. No. I see it as a place where people can learn new sports".*

(JA): "*No, I think when you're first coming to university it's more… you really don't think about the brand at all. I think you are more bothered about… "Is this the right place for me? Is the accommodation okay? Will I like it here?"*

(CO): *"No, I'd just say it was just a university"*

This idea of the student consumers linking a cohesive brand identity to something tangible (e.g. clothing) emerged as a rich area of discussion and has been prevalent throughout. Simmel's (1998) theorisation of objective culture is useful for explaining this. Objective culture refers to a surface level meaning, that is, visible characteristics and manifestations of culture, these are out of the control of the individual. Dependence on the use of tangible goods to generate brand meaning emerged again:

(CA): *"So there is the whole cost, and I think it's the money aspect that makes me realise they are businesses. Actually, maybe, yeah. Yeah. I know they sell clothes and stuff, but I think people associate brands with just like more what you see on the high street, and stuff, if you see what I mean"*

However, when probed further, the student consumer demonstrated that brand meaning evolution occurred through the shifting concepts of objective culture to subjective culture (Simmel, 1998). Subjective culture comprises individuals' ability to produce, transform and improve elements of objective culture for their own needs (Gross, 2012); this is demonstrated at this stage when cultural knowledge of the sport sub-brand is used to negotiate individual meaning (CA): *"even it's got a different logo. It's like … it's got its own different social media page I feel like Team Northumbria is a brand, but I feel like the actual uni isn't, if you know what I mean"*. This could be due to the student consumers at this stage now feeling part of the sub-brand, they are resourceful and active (Fiske, 2004), have gained more power in the co-creation process, allowing the student consumers added control over how the sub-brand community operates and produces cultural knowledge. This also illustrates further

contradictions in the data, as many of the participants demonstrate difficulty in conceptualising the university as a whole as a brand. As a result of this, attempts are made throughout to link aspects of the university environment to what the student consumers perceive to be branding e.g. objective structures such as apparel, sporting logos. The customer engagement literature helps to make sense of this as the notion of interactivity between focal engagement subject(s) and object(s) runs as a common thread for enhancing relationships with brand and is often discussed in most engagement conceptualisations (Jaakkola & Alexander 2014). Her account then goes on to describe more of her meaning making journey, she highlights that the differentiating factor for choosing the university was the reputation of the business school. But, through her enculturation lifecycle she now suggests: *"personally I would say it was a sport university, and I feel massively left out for not doing a sport at this uni, but before I came here I definitely saw it as a business uni".* This demonstrates the shift in meaning as described in the final stage of Donnelly and Young's (1988) model, the socialisation stage of the enculturation lifecycle. This is where insider members of the subcultural environment begin to explicitly inform and influence the individual's identity construction and meaning making (De Chernatony, 2010a; Donnelly & Young, 1988; Kleine & Kleine, 2000). This excerpt also reflects the higher order meaning of Simmel (2010) illustrating clearly how the participant acquired, and consciously attempted to evolve, their identity through the use of university sport.

Other narratives also stated that university sport was a brand, highlighting further the contradictions in the findings. These contradictions include first, the student consumers stating that they did not view the university as a brand before starting. Second, they used university sport apparel to describe a desired identity and thus create

a brand meaning. Third, most still do not perceive the university as a brand at this stage but do view the university sport as a brand, with one participant suggesting (M): *"No, I don't really see it as a brand. As a brand, I think Team Northumbria are probably stronger. The team have their own little culture within their brand".* This supports the notion that meaning is brought about in a consumer relevant context (Brodie et al, 2013; Verma, 2013), the participant is explicit in demonstrating that she has used the cultural prompts from the university sport brand to contextualise meaning on her journey. This is also a further display of the intermediating role of the tribes and student consumer communities in shaping brand meaning. These findings present the key role of peer-to-peer interactions within sub-brands in creating a relevant context which brings about meaning; the student consumer journey touchpoints, touchpoints which go beyond the typical pre-application phase, and the experiences involved in the co-creation of brand meaning (Batey, 2015; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009; Brodie, Whittome, & Brush, 2009; Lemon, & Verhoef, 2016; Palmer, 2010; Payne et al., 2009).

4.3.4.2 The Influence of Brand Controlled Marketing on Student Consumers' Enculturation Journey

The previous section highlights some of the student consumers using objective phenomena to facilitate the enculturation process. What emerged from this was examples where student consumers were illustrating their capacity to use some of this objective culture to transform brand meaning for their own needs e.g. university sport sub-brand apparel and logo analysis. A further area that demonstrates student consumers moving from objective culture to producing subcultural values was through discussions on the recent re-brand the university had undergone. Approximately three months prior to interviewing the students, the university experienced a re-brand. This

presented a great opportunity to explore brand meaning co-creation in HE as the university was visibly seeking to change meaning. What also emerged were clear illustrations of student consumers' meaning they had assigned to the previous brand during these discussions.

Consistent with a fragmented postmodern society, there were mixed student consumer interpretations of the re-brand and the meaning behind the 'new brand'. Many interpretations were presented in relation to the institution losing its heritage and losing features which students thought previously differentiated the institution:

(JA): *"I think it is trying to make us too similar to others. I think we did stand out a lot more before. I think when you're first looking obviously the logo and things like that don't really again mean anything, because it's changed while we are here, that's why you're a bit put off by it, because we probably preferred it to how it was before".*

(M): *"The new logo I'm not that keen on, to be honest, I think it looks too much like others".*

(CA): *"Maybe that's what they are trying to do (compete with Newcastle). I don't know, but everyone I've spoken to personally thinks they shouldn't have done it".*

The response elicited from the interviewees illustrated clear examples of their assigned brand meaning for the university, without meaning the analysis of competing universities would not be possible. Conversely, when presented with the new brand different student consumers believed nothing had changed and the continual university objective of 'ambition' was prevalent across both of the brands (K): *"I don't think it's changed anything. I think if anything it just shows that they want to move forward. But I think it shows more drive and ambition".* Whilst engaging in some clear brand meaning terminology e.g. *'obviously the logo and things like that don't really again mean anything'* these mixed responses to the re-brand reflect the challenges associated with repositioning and brand meaning more generally in HE. Previous literature

(Jewell, 2007) suggests that through the process of a re-brand consumers will first need to un-learn what the brand no longer stands for. However, this implies that the brand is what the university presents it as and therefore makes no allowances for postmodern consumer co-creation. This raises an interesting discussion regarding co-creation. As discussed in the literature (Grönroos 2011; Ramaswamy, 2008; Wikström, 1996; 2008), the co-creation philosophy focuses on how brands create value with consumers rather than for them. Yet the university in this study changed the brand without consulting the student consumers, thus providing a further example of the university brand adopting a modernist approach to branding in the postmodern environment.

One way the students tried to make sense of the re-positioning was once again through marketplace objects as mediators, such as meanings associated with the new logo. Consensus among the student consumers illustrates once more their use of visible characteristics and the manifestations of culture that exist at the objective culture level to initiate meaning, previously through clothing and now through logo discussions. This also demonstrates their enculturation journey, at this stage they are experiencing the brand at a different level, student consumers display this by engaging with different aspects of brand, features of the brand which require lived brand experience before an understanding is created e.g. the re-brand analysis. The student consumers' ability to differentiate between the old and the new brand and with other universities represents how brand awareness and meaning making continues to develop across the student consumer journey as the changing subjective realities of the student consumers evolve:

(K): *"I think it has, I think it has built a brand. I think it's going through a re-brand obviously with their new logo, because I think they've got to that stage where they know that they can compete with Newcastle on a lot of levels, whereas I think before they maybe settled to be in…"*

The process of enculturation enables the student consumers to clearly differentiate the brand from other universities, this demonstrates the student consumers' meaning negotiation and it is here that brand symbolism and imagery assumes significance (Elliott, 1999). Conversely, even though similar differentiation strategies have been adopted e.g. logo analysis and comparisons with competing universities, some student consumers expressed their difficulty in understanding the new meanings:

(B): *"Just don't understand. I don't understand why you had to change, to be honest. It's not as simple and it looks a lot more boring. It doesn't stand out as much because it's not as simple. Yeah, I think they're just copying, I looked at it and Newcastle's logo is very similar. See, I don't understand why they've got to compete. Because they're individual in their own way so I don't understand why they've had to change the logo just to show Newcastle Uni that we're the same, when they're not the same, they're different".*

This student consumer has clearly created a meaning for the brand. Moving away from the objective culture, which has been presented so far regarding the re-brand, evolving towards developing her own subjective values. The cultural context in which these meanings are co-created is significant for university branding, because the meanings illustrated by the student consumers are derived and negotiated through the lived experience of purchase and usage across the journey and these meanings must be validated through the life cycle of the consumer. Therefore, what can be taken from the example above is the idea that when what a student consumer knows changes, the non-conscious knowledge, which has been generated progressively across the student consumer journey in context and develops the conscious of the self and its immediate environment including the networks of association. A common theme regarding student consumers' meaning making, which was consistent across the findings, was the quest for simplicity and what the university stands for. Differentiation is important to a brand, yet findings reveal there are few substantial differentiated features because

the university works hard to match competitors through subtle imitation. The logo is used frequently as an example to demonstrate this. Other themes demonstrate the challenge of differentiating because there is no single simple message advocated by the university:

(CO): *"Yeah, I don't know, I just feel like it doesn't have any substance to it at the minute. I think it's quite an early, young brand. We've just changed our logo, we're trying to get a different perception of Northumbria, I think it's still in its early days, it's not a big brand at all, I don't think so".*

This illustrates an understanding of the university attempting to shift perception from the old brand to the new brand. Furthermore, this also illustrates that through the various student consumer co-creation activities across the student journey, such as the online hashtag community from stage one, the university sport sub-brand from stage two, the re-brand activity from stage three and throughout the lived experience of the brand, co-creation has emerged in this study as a one-way process. That is, the university does not appear to be consulting with the student consumers, as such, the student consumers work hard at creating a brand meaning for themselves, a further example of the university adopting a modernist cultural authority. What this means is that clearly demonstrated in the first two stages of the journey was the importance of the student consumer groups and how communities became an important arena for student consumers to develop their socialisation and co-create shared meaning. The student consumers demonstrate at this stage of the journey a willingness to provide input into the brand's development, through generating valuable ideas, which not only evolves the brand's meaning, but also the student consumer communities. There were further examples of brand development as a co-creation at this stage where student consumers utilised HE marketplace objects to evolve their subconscious brand awareness and brand development as a co-creation. One way the student consumers

tended to do this was through comparisons with a competing university and its brand identity:

(JA): *"Why are we trying to be like Newcastle? Nobody thought, oh, this is quite a nice change… Yeah, everybody literally when it first came was, Why are we trying to be like them?"*

(CO): *"I feel that it's lost its identity, it's changed too much"*

(K): "*Northumbria is trying to compete with Newcastle, so I can see why they've, why they've gone for that, we've kind of tried to copy their crest a bit. I think it's a better… I like the new logo… the old logo was fine; I wouldn't have said they couldn't have moved forward if they still had the old logo and the old brand. But I think the new brand; it helps them to maybe seem a bit more serious and not just the poly uni of Newcastle."*

The ability of the student consumers to analyse in depth attributes belonging to the logo demonstrates a shift in awareness on the student journey. Student consumers were able to move beyond some of the surface level discussions taking place in the pre-purchase stage relating to the brand, its identity and specifically the logo. They discussed higher order meaning such as the impact of colour choice, the structure of the crest, brand identity development, brand identity of competition and perceptions of prestige relating to this:

(E): *"You can tell by the crest, that makes it prestigious. That's just not a university when you see that logo. College. That is a college logo (the old university logo). It's the crest that is university, that's just where my head goes. The colours as well, professional logos, they tend to be… for me, either one colour or maybe two, but simple colours. That is a very bright blue" (old logo).*

(T): *"Yes, definitely. I think like it's former polytechnic uni, plus they chose very colourful logo, and this evoked feelings like maybe they don't take it so much seriously… I think the black colour is much more persuasive".*

These discussions illustrate that when student consumers approach co-creation in the HE environment, they do so with an existing perception of the brand, this structures their expectations, and as the process develops it influences how they create and evaluate meaning. Therefore, co-creation activities offer a social milieu in which student consumers can forge closer links with the university brand, other student consumers, develop new possibilities, learn, share and build on the ideas of each other (Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013).

To provide context for these findings comparisons were made through reader response style questioning (see interview schedule in Appendix C2) to identify interpretations of different university logos. It was an important section to understand how the abstract representation of reality found in the symbolism of the logos can manifest itself in the lived reality of the participants and thus create meaning on the awareness continuum. Aligned to the idea that co-creation stimulates individuals to contribute to brand development, hidden meanings underlying the logos were revealed using marketplace cultural knowledge:

(E): *"It's too big, it does look masculine. I normally think of the colours, Leeds is purple…I don't like the letters on Cambridge. If you see a crest, that is a good uni".*

(JO): *"I think the coat of arms with the Cambridge one does make it stand out. Newcastle's is a bit… they've got the lion head, seen as a pride sort of thing, an English pride sort of thing. A shield, maybe…I think they can look similar, these two especially. I think it is difficult, especially if they're using a lot of coats of arms, they all get lost"*

(K): *"So Newcastle's is very, very English, it has the lion on the top, it's like that sort of persona from Newcastle Uni".*

For these participants, decoding the logos of the universities presented an opportunity for them to demonstrate how their symbolic meanings appropriated through mediated

experience (through analysis of the logo) become more powerful when the student consumers apply them in their realms of lived experience. Because the university had been through a re-brand, the students used the pre-existing knowledge gained from assessing the new logo of their university and applied it the reader response activity. This process was useful as it once again illustrated 1. the use of student consumers' marketplace objects to co-create meaning, and 2. this occurred when something in their current lived context changed; demonstrating when change occurs in the student consumers' environment the non-conscious becomes conscious developing their meaning making systems.

A further area of discussion, which provides greater insight for brand meaning in the reader response section, related to the university sport sub-brand. The sub-brand of university sport emerged as the driver for meaning co-creation in this topic of discussion; this was demonstrated through many examples of students linking the re-brand and the new logo to university sport. Descriptions such as (K):"*back to the sport where it's black and red is your colours, you're having that link", "now it's more together because you've got black from your logo and black and red"* suggesting a better fit between university sport and the new logo, on the contrary (JO): "*Team Northumbria doesn't fit in massively with the new logo",* highlights the different nuanced ways this has been represented. Previously, clothing, e.g. university sport apparel, was used to co-create meaning via the sub-brand community and now other paraphernalia is being used, e.g. the logo. A central theme for both of these factors is how the student consumer adopts market place objects from the university sport sub-brand's objective culture and develops their own subcultural values to progress towards individual meaning. As a result, in their attempts to make the main university brand more personalised (something that postmodern consumers seek to do) and thus

relevant (Keller, 2020), the student consumers segment themselves to express their identity construction and define themselves as sport students. This is how student consumers and the university brand have fit into their respective landscapes in the current study.

While this discourse originates in discussions that are directly related to the new logo, this focus on relevance soon expands into the abstraction of other topics that are perceived as semantically connected to university brand meaning. In particular, this included the analysis of the positioning statement. Therefore, in the same way the student consumers produced and re-produced the narrative in the hashtag community at the pre-purchase stage, at this stage they were adopting a similar cultural strategy. A general theme throughout revealed that the student consumers believed that deconstructing the positioning statement was important to their current understanding of the university, yet most of the interviewees had not seen the positioning statement prior to interview. This was with the exception of one participant who noted that he had just read the positioning statement on the website prior to the interview. Comments such as (CA): *"I don't know about research-rich. It's not one of them ones you hear about like other uni's finding a cure for cancer"*, and (JA): *"I'd say research and business focused is probably pretty accurate, but I think compared to other universities it's maybe not up there as much",* were employed to compare universities in an attempt to position the university as more relevant to the student consumers. Similarly, others suggested that the university had not quite reached its ambitious statement (CO): "*no, it's not there yet. I think it could be, it is very business focused. But professional university, I'm not sure about that one".* Others viewed it as a promotional tagline and assessed its suitability of motivating them to join the institution (E): *"That wouldn't bring me in, I don't think. I don't really do research*

or business". The term 'business focused' was interpreted by many as the university referring to its successful business school (M): *"I guess the business-focus, because obviously the business school is really well thought of, it sounds pretty good though, doesn't it, when you read it",* with another referring to the marketisation tension of the organisation (JO): *"Business-focussed, I mean, it is about making money at the end of the day and they are business-focussed".* One participant even reflected on her lived experience with the institution to firmly disagree with the inclusion of the terms 'academic excellence' in the statement (T): *"I think they are definitely business focused, but, well my experience with the academic excellence I can't agree with this so far".* Literature (e.g., Fazio & Zanna, 1978; Nysveen & Pedersen, 2014; Smith & Swinyard, 1988) suggests that attitudes formed through lived experience are stronger, more accessible, and held more confidently. Indeed, for the student consumers in this study, reflecting on their first year experiences enabled them to assert a high level of analysis and thus interpretation regarding their journey and the perceptions constructed of the university in relation to the positioning statement during their first year. It also illustrates how they navigate the concept of relevance (e.g. academic excellence is not relevant for the interviewee above) for their individualised meanings using their interpretations of university marketing in relation to their lived experience with the university brand. What this demonstrates in this study is that modernist modes of marketing have had very little influence on the student consumer's construction of brand meaning. Therefore, meanings are constructed beyond the brand-controlled marketing and findings across the journey have demonstrated that facilitating a consumer-involved approach, as consumers in postmodern society have become accustomed, increases the sense of personalised co-creative opportunity for brand meaning.

4.3.4.3 Individual Meaning and Subjective Values

Appropriating brand meaning through the continuous interlacing of lived and mediated experiences is central to postmodernity. It has been demonstrated throughout the student consumer journey that in the course of social interactions, student consumers embrace, negotiate and co-create social representations, rules and conventions of various kinds of symbolic forms (Elliott & Wattanusuwan, 1998; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Only through this process of discursive elaboration are symbolic meanings appropriated socially. In view of this, the use of localised terminology was evident within many accounts, which not only demonstrated the student consumers' understanding of underlying associations that comprise the uniqueness of the university but also their individual meanings. This is reflected in many of the interviewees' accounts when they discuss the role of competing institutions and the influence on meaning making (CO): *"some would definitely call it a poly, that is the first thing someone would say, and quite a lot of stick goes around Northumbria"*. One participant talks specifically about the potential difficulties the university faces in eliminating those unwanted 'poly' associations (E): *"Yeah. Whenever I think of Northumbria, I do think of polytechnics, because I don't think it's ever going to be able to shake that off".* What is also demonstrated in this localised terminology is the learning of the brand and the impact the student consumers' lived experience has had on this as one interviewee claims she (CA): *"never knew this whole poly versus posh thing, I didn't even know poly was a word, I'd never heard of it before".* Therefore, localised terminology in this study not only provides the interviewees with the opportunity to co-create meaning via demonstrating their individual knowledge base, it also helps them to differentiate the university from competition and consequently identify a meaning and use it in a social context (e.g.

poly v posh) to interpret meaning. Moreover, what this finding reveals is that differentiation emerges from the student consumer groups and communities rather than the university, this again supports the previous stage findings that co-creation in this environment is operating as a one-way process because of the university's modernist marketing offerings. It is useful to reflect on the work of Stern (1989) and Brown et al. (2003) at this stage, as they describe how consumers assign brand meanings through the stories they construct with each other. Specifically, the student consumers are using localised terminology to curate these brand stories, this provides the student consumers with a cultural resource for group affirmation, identity construction and value-idealisation (Roper, Caruana, Medway & Murphy, 2013). Likewise, findings extend Sirsi, Ward and Reingen's (1996) view that 'interaction between experts and novices' is cultural knowledge sharing. This is because some student consumers (e.g. the frequent posters in the hashtag community in stage one and the established sports players in the sport sub-brand community at stage two), act as providers, are able to influence the development of marketplace objects (e.g. university branded hooded jumper at stage one, sport branded apparel at stage two), while also benefiting from how they have socialised through the use of marketplace objects (see previous Veblen and Simmel discussion). Therefore, discursive approaches (e.g. the localised meaning use of the student consumers) highlights further the role of consumers in shaping university brand meanings through their purposive use of language (Roper et al., 2013), whereby meaning is carried back and forth amongst individuals (Hirschman, 1998) and continuously produced and reproduced on the student consumer enculturation journey.

A further area where discursive approaches demonstrate the student consumers had development of their own subjective values for the university brand was through word

of mouth activities. Researchers suggest that services, which are complex, unique and variable, are prone to word of mouth communications (Berry & Seltman, 2007). In the current study, some student consumers demonstrated their motivation to co-create meaning in this way through word of mouth communication:

(CO): *"I rave about it when I go home, I tell everyone what uni I go to, I love Northumbria now, because I am here".*

(K): *"Yeah, I'd be happy to… I'm not afraid to say that I'm from Northumbria, that I go to Northumbria".*

(M): *"I'm really enjoying it. If someone asked about uni and stuff, I'd be like, Yeah, I'm at Northumbria, I guess I'd recommend it to people as well because I've had such a nice experience coming in in my first year. It's good".*

This sense of pride illustrated in the excerpts above further demonstrates student consumers' meaning evolution from objective culture to their own subjective values. This is because through their lived experience with the brand they no longer need to solely rely on the objective culture to make sense of the brand, through their sub-brand experience they have now curated subjective values and use these to inform outsiders. This highlights two competing narratives, the university is objective and the student consumers make meaning from that or that the university is a product of the students, therefore it is their subjective meanings that matter to each other. That is, modernist cultural authority versus postmodern co-creation at a subjective level. Essentially, it is the latter in action through the use of the sub-brand.

Identity emerged central to these subjective meanings as one student consumer used word of mouth strategies to construct a preferred identity, to curate a desired image of the brand using the meanings they had constructed through discourses surrounding this image. Ultimately, such that the individual is perceived to be consuming the right

stuff in the right ways (Belk et al. 1989; Bengtsson, Ostberg, & Kjeldgaard, 2005; Cronin, McCarthy, Brennan, & McCarthy, 2014; Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998; Gabriel & Lang 2006; Larsen & Patterson, 2018; McCracken 1990):

(E): "*Depends who I'm talking to. If I go home I'll just say the Law School; I won't say Northumbria. The Law School has a really good standing, it's better than the uni so you go with the Law School."*

However, when probed a little further, the student revealed far more than her identity project motivations: (E)*: "No, I'd say one of the biggest things keeping me here now is TN. Law School brought me but TN is keeping me here. If I didn't do the sport I'd probably go nearer home".* Through the process of enculturation, this participant has realised that university sport is a priority for representing her identity now, not the course as previously discussed. What this demonstrates is when student consumers use brand controlled marketing such as the course or logo etc. they struggle to understand university brand meaning. Only when they embrace their individual, subjective values through marketplace resources such as the university sport sub-brand apparel do they co-create university brand meaning. This negotiation of identity by the student consumer is influenced not only by embracing particular kinds of the brand such as artefacts, patterns and meanings (Hogg, Banister, & Stephenson, 2009; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Wattanasuwan, 2005) it also achieves distinction through these meanings, relying on the ability to individuate and re-elaborate the material and symbolic offerings of the university brand (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 1995). Therefore, through this shrewd deployment of the university brand (Larsen & Patterson, 2018) the student consumer makes a conscious decision of what and how to express the brand through dialogue during social interactions, reflecting their understanding of the brand meaning (Dean et al., 2016) e.g. whether she chooses to

communicate the Law School or the university in a given social milieu. It is plausible to suggest this student consumer also re-evaluates the brand meaning based on these social interactions, highlighting her brand meaning co-creation. Relatedly, a different student consumer demonstrates his evolving brand awareness across the journey:

(JO): *"No, not really. I think the universities, I never really saw them as brands at that time. It was just almost like a school, it was where you got your education and met friends. Yeah, I think it does. I think until you're actually inside a business or an organisation like the uni, it's tough when you're outside looking in to actually understand all the aspects. I think no matter how much someone says something; you can't really see it so you maybe don't fully understand what it means, I feel like I understand university life more".*

The account reveals the journey the participant has been through to make sense of the brand. Importantly, it is a clear acknowledgment of how his lived and direct experiences with the university have enabled an evaluation and subsequently an understanding of the brand. When probed about what he thought the university brand means to him he describes the brand as a 'commodity' and selling 'education' as he posits*:*

(JO): *"What makes it a brand to me? The fact that it has a big influence on a lot of people. Like you say, with the people wearing Northumbria University clothes, coming to uni, being part of the university, selling a commodity is what they're selling you, education. So yeah, I think it is a brand".*

Student consumers are making a key decision to come to university, but they recognise they are not buying a brand at the pre-purchase stage. Instead, brand meaning for them only emerges when student consumers arrive at the university and begin to learn and make sense of the brand through the lived brand experiences. The student consumers attributed their university decision making to a wide variety of influences. These include (M): *"I think the sport was what brought me here, that was one of the main factors of choosing really, I guess, the facilities and things",* similarly a different

participant suggests (JA): *"I do think for me a big thing is the sport, but I think also just the way it's been set out, the courses and stuff, it's so different",* with another also highlighting the course as an influence (CO): *"Course and sport to be fair, not many places I know did sport management".* Others included some external influences in their accounts (K): *"already you knew the reputation of night life for instance, the amount that you can do in Newcastle I think in choosing it was definitely the sport".* One acknowledged her teachers' input in the decision making process (E): *"Northumbria I obviously had in my head because that's the one the tutors taught us".* One provided a multitude of reasons for his decision making (JO): *"It was a big university, good at sport. but I think although it isn't that, it does have a good reputation and I think that's what really drew me in, and what I saw when I came. Newcastle the city was a big thing, it's really good facilities. I know that the sport was a massive aspect of the uni life and it is… although it wasn't a big aspect in my decision-making",* highlighting that he thought sport was hugely influential even though he claims it did not impact on his decision as a non-member of university sport. A different interviewee responded by using this opportunity to highlight once again that she did not see the university as a brand (CA): *"I don't think I've ever seen it as a brand, just saw it as a uni really".*

Prior to purchase perception revealed that student consumers did not believe they were purchasing anything, at least not in the same way they make purchases in other areas of their lives. This is clearly illustrated in interviewees' accounts when describing the search for an education not a brand:

(T): *"I think it was the recommendation from the agency, because of the business school; I primarily went here because of the education".*

(JO): *"No, not really. I think the universities, I never really saw them as brands at that time. It was just almost like a school, it was where you got your education and met friends".*

These responses to university decision making by the student consumers strengthen further the idea that higher education brands need to move from a modernist and one dimensional approach to marketing strategy, they need to view higher education branding as a fluid and evolving process that creates and manifests student lived experience. The university also needs to recognise and understand what is important to the student consumers when they are co-creating meaning, this has been demonstrated with a cultural focus throughout the findings section across the three stages of the student consumer journey as the student consumers evolve and engage with different aspects of the university brand.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has analysed the co-creation of brand meaning in the English higher education market. In particular, the theoretical developments of Simmel's work on interactions, objective and subjective meaning has proved valuable in demonstrating the complexities involved in brand meaning co-creation in the HE environment. The benefits of applying theoretical frameworks conceived in other disciplines have emerged when using Simmel's work to explain brand meaning co-creation in the postmodern environment. It has been argued (Trigg, 2001; Wild, 2016) that due to the fragmented nature of postmodern society the 'trickle down' imitation effect described by Simmel when discussing social hierarchies and fashion is no longer relevant, this is because it is too restrictive in describing that emulating social groups is a one-directional activity. However, it is argued that Simmel's work on imitation remains significant for illustrating how the rise of the peer-to-peer marketplace in postmodern

society demonstrates that individuals still seek identity through emulation and interpersonal means. The latest theoretical developments from the customer engagement literature has been useful in helping to develop Simmel's ideas to explain how the contemporary consumer co-creates brand meaning. This has contributed to the current study by showing that in the peer-to-peer marketplace relationships are not just between consumers and producers, but between any combination of (and among) potential and existing customers, non-customers, society in general, their extended relationships, and brands. It is through such engagement that relationships between individuals and brands are formed, in turn this provides consumers with motivation to engage with co-creative processes.

The thesis presented by this study is that brand meaning in the higher education environment is produced and re-produced iteratively throughout the student consumer's longitudinal journey. Each of the three stages of the student consumer journey was explored to understand student consumers' enculturation processes and how they used marketplace resources to inform and change student consumers' objective culture to subjective values. Engagement with these different parts of the brand elicits feedback, which challenges brand meaning understanding and continuously manifests, transforms and feeds back into the changing student consumer realities. This is presented visually in a framework as in Figure 17. This thesis has demonstrated how brand meaning emerges across the student consumer journey in the HE environment. The following chapter draws an end to the thesis by presenting conclusions and contributions to knowledge and summarising the areas for future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTICE

5.0. Chapter Five Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to construct conclusions that answer the primary thesis, and to make recommendations that contribute to HE branding theory and practice. Approaches for future research, based on the findings of this study, are also proposed. In particular, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that brand meaning in the HE environment is co-created through a longitudinal process as student consumers make sense of their lived experiences and identity pursuits, as a result of communal engagement and social interaction.

5.1 Conclusions

There have been significant calls for a direct exploration of students' brand meaning making in HE. This thesis explains how student consumers in HE co-create brand meaning on a longitudinal journey and the ways that meaning making emerges as part of a network of associations, which includes the student consumers, the market and the university. It also illustrates how brand meaning changes and evolves throughout the student journey on a continuum.

Stage One explored the prospective student's experiences with the brand. The student consumers at this stage demonstrated initial subconscious brand awareness and co-

creation of meaning using university branded apparel ‘selfies’. Representative of a postmodern era where consumers are empowered not only to interact with the brand on Web 2.0 technologies, but also with other consumers (Cova & White, 2010; De Chernatony & Christodoulides, 2004; Hoffman & Novak, 1996), prospective student consumers demonstrated their motivations to co-create and change the narrative of the university initiated social media messages. Participant observations in this study offered a prime exploratory case of important themes of interaction to students’ transition. Stage Two explored the initial stages of consumption, in a context that represented the first few weeks of starting at the university. Using focus groups Stage Two findings revealed how student communities form and how this led to the formation of their socialisation process, as the student consumers made sense of their lived experience with the brand and constructed desirable identities to assist transition. The use of university branded apparel emerged central to student consumers’ discussions on symbolising their values and norms appropriate for their transition into university culture. Stage Three, the established consumption stage, signified a clear illustration of the complexity of the student consumer’s meaning co-creation journey. At Stage Two student consumers arrived on campus and started to evolve beyond their subconscious awareness of the brand through the lived experiences of the brand. But, at Stage Three, a clear socialisation and enculturation process had developed for many of the student consumers through interactions, dialogues and direct brand experiences, which enabled them to question assigned meanings for the university brand. Some student consumers at this stage could provide examples of conscious brand awareness through their meaning co-creation and points of differentiation for the university brand. This notion of an active empowered consumer is just as prevalent in Stage One as it is in Stage Three. This is because the student consumer across the journey

demonstrates making choices such as which location to choose (appropriate) as they acquire (appropriating) information about the university. However, there was a clear progression from interpreting university marketing to co-creating peer-to-peer meaning as the journey evolved. This active demonstration of co-creative postmodern consumers whose understanding of the cultural phenomenon (the importance of the university apparel from the outset) is again mutually constitutive of the development of that phenomenon. Peer-to-peer learning and sharing are central to this facilitation of brand experience with the university. Therefore, to answer the thesis, the findings demonstrate across the student consumer journey that the university never truly emerged as a brand, however, the university sub-brands communities (e.g. sport, business, law) did emerge as brands and therefore were central to how the student consumers constructed brand meaning.

5.2 Contributions to Knowledge

This thesis makes a number of significant contributions to the extant HE branding literature. The first contribution to knowledge this thesis makes is that postmodern education brand experience is co-created as a process throughout the longitudinal journey of the student consumers. This is a direct consequence of the constant iterations between student consumers, the university and the market. The ongoing interactions and dialogues between these actors revealed that meanings in the HE environment are embedded in a network of associations, that is, as part of a system of individual and collective identities mutually determining one another in an increasingly interlinked social system with rituals and cultural understanding. This leads to a brand socialisation and enculturation process across a three stage student consumer journey, prior to, initial and established purchase. Through this learning process, student consumer identity projects emerged as a contextual focus of the

highest order and a central mode of communication between the student consumer groups. Therefore, a further contribution to knowledge this thesis makes is revealing the intermediating role of the student consumer groups in shaping this brand experience. The nature of this brand experience keeps evolving with changing subjective realities of students as they learn the brand's strategic priorities and its culturally constituted market knowledge. As a result, the co-creation of meaning takes place within the enculturation process as the student consumer communities form and it is when these networked co-creations are contextualised within the communities that the lived experience of the brand becomes meaningful and brand meaning begins to consciously emerge. Student consumers through this process demonstrate moving from objective culture to subjective culture. Social influences are central to this process as novices relied on objective meaning because they did not know any better but other individuals demonstrated capacity to produce, transform and improve elements of objective culture for their own needs using cultural knowledge of the sub-brands to negotiate individual meaning.

Another contribution to knowledge is that student consumers do not recognise the university brand as they recognise other brands in their lives. Student consumers frequently expressed their natural inclination to link brands/processes of branding to products, e.g. apparel. However, conscious meanings of these tangible representations only emerged for the student consumers after purchase. Therefore, because of this, student consumers did not identify they were making a purchase when choosing the university, or at least not in the same way they did for other brand purchases in their lives. This influenced their creation of value and since value requires relevance to become meaningful (Keller, 2020) student consumers did not recognise the main university brand as a relevant brand in their lives. It is only when the student

consumers engage in peer-to-peer interactions within the sub-brand community that a relevant context is created and conscious meaning emerges. It is this very nature of the student perception of the brand (initially) and experience of it (as the journey goes) that calls for education marketers to go beyond the modernist thinking in strategy. The strategy needs shifting to more cultural methods as the student journey evolves and offers power and ownership to student consumers to co-create their own subjective experience and narrative of their student life as a Northumbria University student.

A further contribution to knowledge this thesis makes is that the university is not a cohesive brand, but instead a fragmented alliance of sub-brands from the consumer perspective. Findings revealed that the university sport sub-brand is used as a symbolic, cultural focal point at both the second and third stage of the student consumer journey. Yet, the use of the sub-brand was not held together by typical consumption activities, therefore the findings reveal both evidence of tribal and brand community behaviour facilitating student consumers' brand awareness and meaning. At a sub-conscious level, the university brand facilitates the student consumers getting into social groups; this provided them with the opportunity to co-create meaning through their lived experience with the university sport sub-brand. It is well established in the literature that care must be taken in observing subcultures, brand communities and tribes as distinct categories (Canniford, 2011). Yet, the thesis findings take this caveat further and propose that these concepts operate together in the HE environment, the fluid nature of interplays between different types of communities (brand community vs tribe) shifts from one type of community to another, this forms part of the student consumer's creative process of enculturation. This creative process was also notable in discussions on the re-brand activity as the student consumers used the re-brand to demonstrate they had built meaning beyond

the brand controlled marketing. Re-brand discussions were also central in demonstrating the student consumer's shift from objective culture to subjective culture. This makes a further contribution to knowledge as academics and practitioners are yet to explore re-branding in action in consultation with the student consumers across the student consumer journey.

The findings of this thesis also provide insight for segmentation and the HE environment. The university in this case study adopted a market driven strategy to promote the university, this is problematic in a postmodern society where contemporary consumers seek to use brands as symbolic resources, to cultivate meaning. The university marketing strategies reported by student consumers were largely modernist modes of marketing, thus, modernist in a postmodern era, adopting traditional service marketing strategies rather than cultural marketing strategies. However, the first stage of the journey revealed how the university enables the creation of social media user generated content, which can begin to identify not only changes in student communication behaviour and activity, but also what engages the student in conversation. Yet, also at this stage, social media continues to be used as a promotional (modernist) tool for the university. By focusing on promotion rather than relationship management (cultural strategies), the university is overlooking an opportunity to benefit from insight into transitioning student conversations in the pre-arrival stage. Therefore, there is a gap between what happens and what should be happening; if HE marketers adopted a cultural strategy across the entire journey they could place greater emphasis on relationship management and benefit from the student consumers co-creative insight.

A further methodological contribution was the interpretation of the university social media messages from the pre-purchase stage of the journey. Whilst exploring the

student consumers' responses to the university marketing messages in the online environment, it became apparent that message interpretation was far more complex than extant literature had described. A figure (see Appendix D1) was created from the findings that illustrates the possible interpretations of the same message within the hashtag community depending upon the social media platform used and the device used to access and transmit the message. The findings demonstrated the interplay between platform and device must be accounted for in an understanding of any message exchange. Furthermore, meaning was co-created within this hashtag discussion thread across platforms and across devices, de-privileging further the role of the sender (the university in this context), moving the receiver further away from the sender, which in turn, increased the chance of losing the original message intention and miss-communication. This contributes to methodological and practical approaches to social media marketing.

This thesis commenced by focussing on the direct experiences of the student consumers in the HE environment. However, by focusing on the ways in which student consumers negotiate their positions in a consumer culture, what also emerged was the need to understand what the HE marketer was doing. For example, merely focusing on what the student consumer was doing would have resulted in a missed opportunity to explore the ways in which the student consumers and the HE brand/s negotiate cultural meanings in relation to each other and the marketplace (Penaloza, 2001). Because of this, a final contribution to knowledge this thesis makes is that the student consumers provide meaning to a brand (the university) that has chosen them (the student consumers) to be part of its community. This finding is unique to the HE marketplace as the university brand consumes the student consumer rather than the

students consuming the brand, presenting a new dimension to the notion of co-creation.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions to Knowledge

The grounding of this thesis in the theory of co-creation has provided a number of new insights and alternative perspectives to the HE branding literature. The contribution that co-creation theory can make to an increased theoretical understanding of brands, has been demonstrated by a number of authors who have previously drawn upon the co-creation concepts of value, exchange, involvement and the active role of consumers to explain how brands become meaningful to consumers in the commercial world (Carù & Cova, 2007; Cova, & Dalli, 2009; Etgar, 2008; Pongsakornrungsilp, & Schroeder, 2011; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2004a; Vargo & Lusch 2004b, 2008). However, by applying the work of Simmel (2010) to the contemporary environment and using recent ideas from the customer engagement literature (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek, & Macky, 2019), this has presented a much broader application of co-creation theory within HE branding research to understand brand meaning, leading to the identification of a number of theoretical contributions.

The research adds to the existing knowledge in HE branding by demonstrating:

- Postmodern education brand experiences in English HE are co-created as a process throughout the longitudinal journey of the student consumers.
- Brand meaning in the HE environment is embedded in a network of associations, that is part of a system of individual and collective identities mutually determining one another in an increasingly interlinked social system with rituals and cultural understanding.

- Co-creation of meaning takes place within the enculturation process across a three-stage student consumer journey.
- Student consumer identity projects emerged as a contextual focus of the highest order and a central mode of communication between the student consumer groups.
- Brand meaning keeps evolving with changing subjective realities of students.

This thesis has demonstrated the role played by the student consumer journey, the student consumer groups and the student consumer identity projects in the co-creation of brand meaning in the HE environment, which has not previously been noted in the literature. Moreover, the thesis has demonstrated that brand meaning keeps evolving and manifesting across the journey as a result of student consumers interactions and experiences. The thesis has therefore contributed theoretically grounded insights into how student consumers co-create brand meaning for an English University brand. This has been illustrated by using a novel theoretical framework which has adopted insights from the seminal work of Simmel and the customer engagement literature to advance knowledge in the areas of co-creation, HE branding and wider branding studies.

5.4 Recommendations for Marketing Practice

The findings of this thesis have suggested several recommendations for HE branding and marketing in practice. The core practitioner contribution this thesis makes is the identification of how some student consumers co-create brand meaning as a process on their longitudinal journey, as well as illustrating what they assign meaning to. Through the identification of this complex and multi-layered area, this research provides a platform for the development of a coherent brand meaning for HE practitioners. The following suggestions will assist HE marketers' understanding of brand meaning co-creation:

- The thesis demonstrates how HE brands need to move away from modernist and one dimensional marketing strategies, this is because they need to view HE branding as a fluid and evolving process to create and manifest student experience, as this continuously and endlessly transforms the brand, possibly even post-graduation. Furthermore, the value of peer influence in informing transitional choices is not being developed to its full extent. A way to address this is for HE brands to understand that some of the pre-arrival communications, which are taking place online, become part of the ongoing conversations of students' subjective realities, some of which should feedback to HE marketers and other actors interested in the system itself. This also illustrates that the brand mediated or student consumer constructed groups are central to facilitation of brand experience and brand attachment. Therefore, the thesis recommends that HE brand engagement strategies should be different during pre-enrolment and post-enrolment, adopting a cultural strategy. HE marketers should place greater emphasis on relationship management strategies unique to each stage of the journey and therefore benefit from the student consumers' co-creative insights evolving at each stage.
- If universities want to dedicate significant resources and attention to building strong brands then HE branding and marketing activity must imitate the lived experience the student consumers experience with other postmodern brands in their lives. Findings demonstrated that the university brand was irrelevant, the student consumers did not initially recognise the university brand as they recognise other brands in their lives. However, they did adopt the behaviours associated with consumption of a meaningful brand. The research indicates that practitioners need to place greater emphasis on bringing the brand to the

forefront through emphasising what the student consumers are buying. There was much confusion surrounding marketing and branding in the HE environment, central to this was the notion that the student consumers believed they were not making a typical purchase. This was because the university according to the student consumers' recall of marketing activity tended to adopt modernist forms of marketing. Relatedly, the re-brand activity findings demonstrated that the HE brand appears to be doing the opposite of what takes place in the commercial sector. That is, the HE brand did not involve the student consumers in key decisions when making significant changes to the brand and the brand identity. Therefore, by adopting a cultural approach, a better understanding of the postmodern student consumer would assist HE marketers in understanding the type of marketing the student consumers recognise in the contemporary environment. For example, student consumers frequently discussed how word of mouth activity influenced their decision to choose the university. In service brand organisations such as universities, word of mouth communication is common due to service brand's intangible core (Berry, 2000; De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). This is more important for the co-creation of brand meaning in the HE environment, which emerges on a continuum after direct experience with the brand. While much of the focus of marketing and communications was found to exist around promotional activity by university marketing, the research indicated that HE marketing practitioners need to place greater emphasis on managing relationships between the student consumer peer-to-peer relationships with the brand. By doing this HE marketers can benefit from the co-creative insight demonstrated in the transitioning student consumers' conversations

(Hardcastle et al., 2019) and use this to strengthen awareness and perceptions of the brand prior to purchase.

- The research provides insight for managing consumption communities in the HE environment. Challenges relating to segmentation in the HE environment were presented throughout the study. As a result, student consumers developed their own self-segmentation strategies using postmodern tribes through their lived experiences with the brand e.g. using the university sport sub-brand to co-create meaning because the student consumers perceived the sub-brand as more relevant for accessing meaning to assist co-creation. The findings proposed that tribes and brand communities operated together in the HE environment to allow student consumers to co-create meaning for the brand. However, the main university brand did emerge as a meaningless facilitator. Therefore, HE brands not only need to involve the consumer at every stage of the journey, the university brand also needs to learn how to become a meaningful facilitator by adopting cultural strategies that recognise that the brand is mediated through student consumer groups across a journey, this journey continuously and endlessly transforms the brand meaning.

5.5 Limitations

This thesis provides new insights into brand meaning co-creation in the context of higher education but there were some limitations confronted in this study, particularly the representativeness of the findings and their application more generally. For example, this thesis only explored in depth one university, in the north east of England. While the problem of generalisability (Butler-Kisber, 2010) is recognised, the focus was on depth rather than breadth. The case study did take into consideration netnography data, focus groups, interviews, and researcher field notes which helped

to provide a *"very detailed in-depth understanding"* (Arthur, Mitchell, Lewis, & McNaughton-Nicholls, 2014, p. 67) which can assist future related studies. Furthermore, as *"there is no single interpretive truth"* (Denzin & Lincoln 2011, p. 15), the interpretations the researcher has derived from the data, which have shaped the findings cannot be considered the only possible interpretations that could have emerged from the data. Moreover, the longitudinal journey did not follow the same group of students through the entire journey. Due to the significant amount of time the researcher was required to be immersed in the journey and data collection processes (33 months), it was not possible to follow the same cohort of students from the start of their application phase to the end of their first year. However, the thesis demonstrated how a cohort can be studied on a longitudinal journey and therefore offers a research design which can be used in future studies.

5.6 Recommendations for Further Research

The innovative theoretical and methodological approach adopted for this study could be employed by other researchers to understand what the university brand means for various stakeholder groups of the university. For example, this thesis adopted three separate studies, which were deliberately planned in line with the university's student consumer application and arrival cycle. This allowed the mapping of student consumers' experiences with the university across a journey and demonstrated how and when brand meaning emerged in this specific university's environment. Other universities could adopt a similar methodological approach to understand what is important for their student consumers and other key stakeholders on the brand awareness journey. Further scope with different stakeholder groups may consider the iterative and continuously transforming nature of brand meaning with alumni. As discussed in the introduction, it is not the intention of this thesis to suggest that brand

meaning stops evolving after the end of the first year of the undergraduate journey, rather, post first year is beyond the scope of the current thesis, therefore future studies should explore the evolving nature of brand meaning with students and alumni to understand how brand meaning is negotiated during social interactions in an external environment.

The findings of this thesis also provide opportunities for further research on the impact of unconditional offer tactics and clearing day activities on brand meaning for English universities. Recent trends have shown (Adams, 2020) clearing is no longer just for student consumers who failed to achieve their predicted grades. Clearing now appeals to various segments including the adjusters, the U-turners and judicious students and the last-minute applicants. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to explore how this influences brand meaning, e.g. do university brands promote a widely recognised single message that attracts both the panicked and astute student consumers in order to stay ahead of competition in the pre-purchase stage of the student consumer journey?

Finally, an interesting line of enquiry for future research includes exploring the contemporary wider narratives that English HE operates within and how this influences brand meaning. There are clear challenges in creating a coherent university brand identity, this has been documented throughout this thesis. In addition, an emerging theme of discussion surrounds a disjoint between what universities do, including their role and purpose in society and what wider society believe the true value of HE is. As such, future research is encouraged to understand wider societal stakeholder groups, the context of a university's public or private status and how this influences purpose and brand meaning.

5.7 Concluding Statement

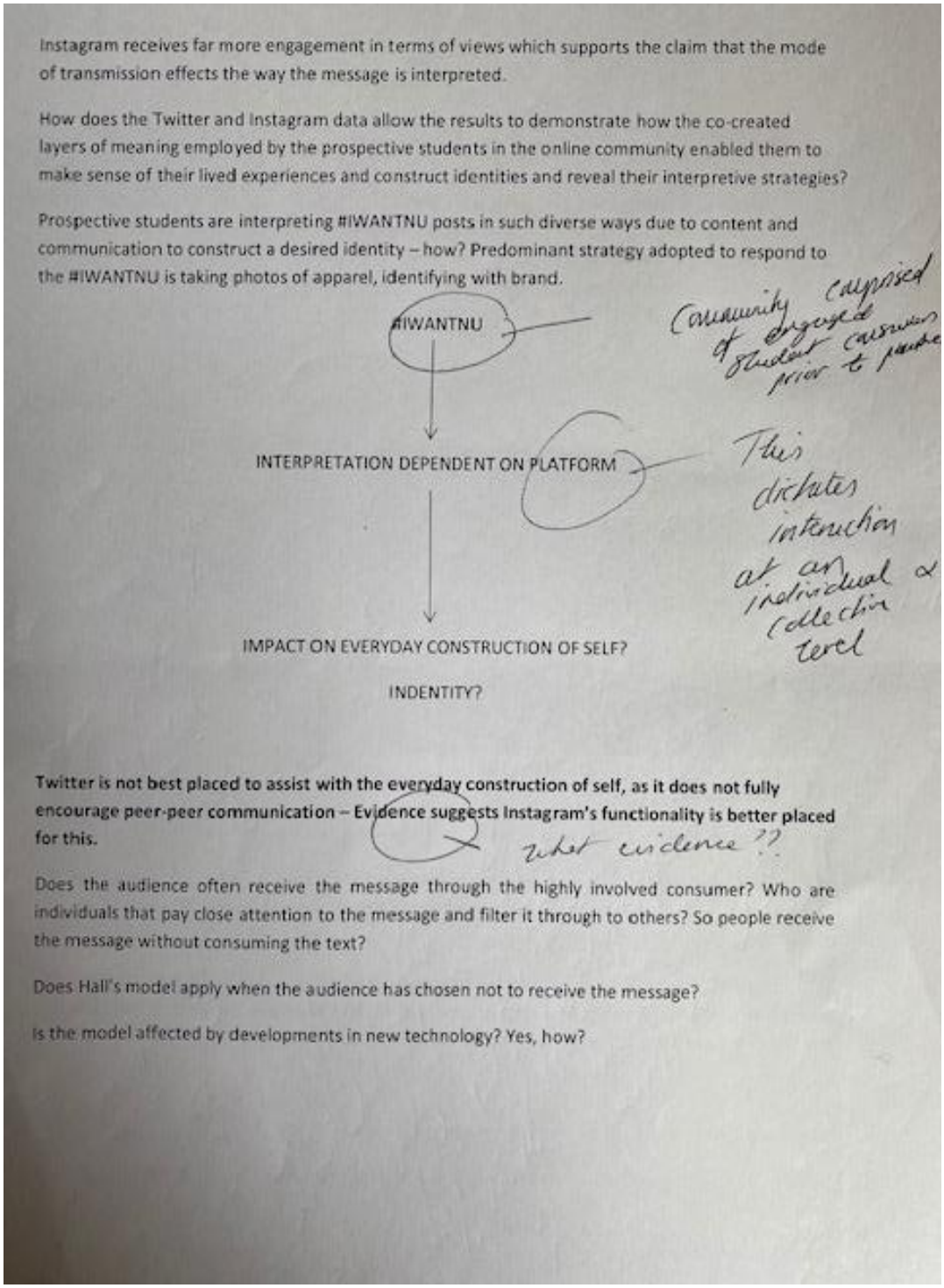
Brand meaning and awareness in the HE environment emerged as more complex and fragmented than previous studies had acknowledged. It was only through a co-creative approach that focussed on the student consumer's journey that brand meaning emerged as a process and could be explored.

Adopting a study design which drew from a variety of concepts and theories from different disciplines, enabled student consumers to describe their mediated and lived experiences with the university brand and reveal how their enculturation process developed. In particular, although there was some level of brand experience that existed prior to the student consumers arriving and enrolling, actual brand experience is co-created iteratively within ongoing social interactions between student consumers, the university brand and the marketplace. By revealing what they were using to co-create meaning, student consumers' narratives demonstrated that brand meaning keeps evolving with the changing subjective realities of the students, central to this were the student consumer groups, culturally constituted market knowledge and student consumers' identity projects. The thesis recommendations provide practical theory-based suggestions required by university brands to understand how postmodern brand meaning and experience is co-created.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – Supporting Documentation for Pre-purchase Stage

A1. Researcher Field Notes from the #IWANTNU community



Instagram receives far more engagement in terms of views which supports the claim that the mode of transmission effects the way the message is interpreted.

How does the Twitter and Instagram data allow the results to demonstrate how the co-created layers of meaning employed by the prospective students in the online community enabled them to make sense of their lived experiences and construct identities and reveal their interpretive strategies?

Prospective students are interpreting #IWANTNU posts in such diverse ways due to content and communication to construct a desired identity – how? Predominant strategy adopted to respond to the #IWANTNU is taking photos of apparel, identifying with brand.

#IWANTNU

Community comprised of engaged student cohort prior to [illegible]

INTERPRETATION DEPENDENT ON PLATFORM

This dictates interaction at an individual & collective level

IMPACT ON EVERYDAY CONSTRUCTION OF SELF?

INDENTITY?

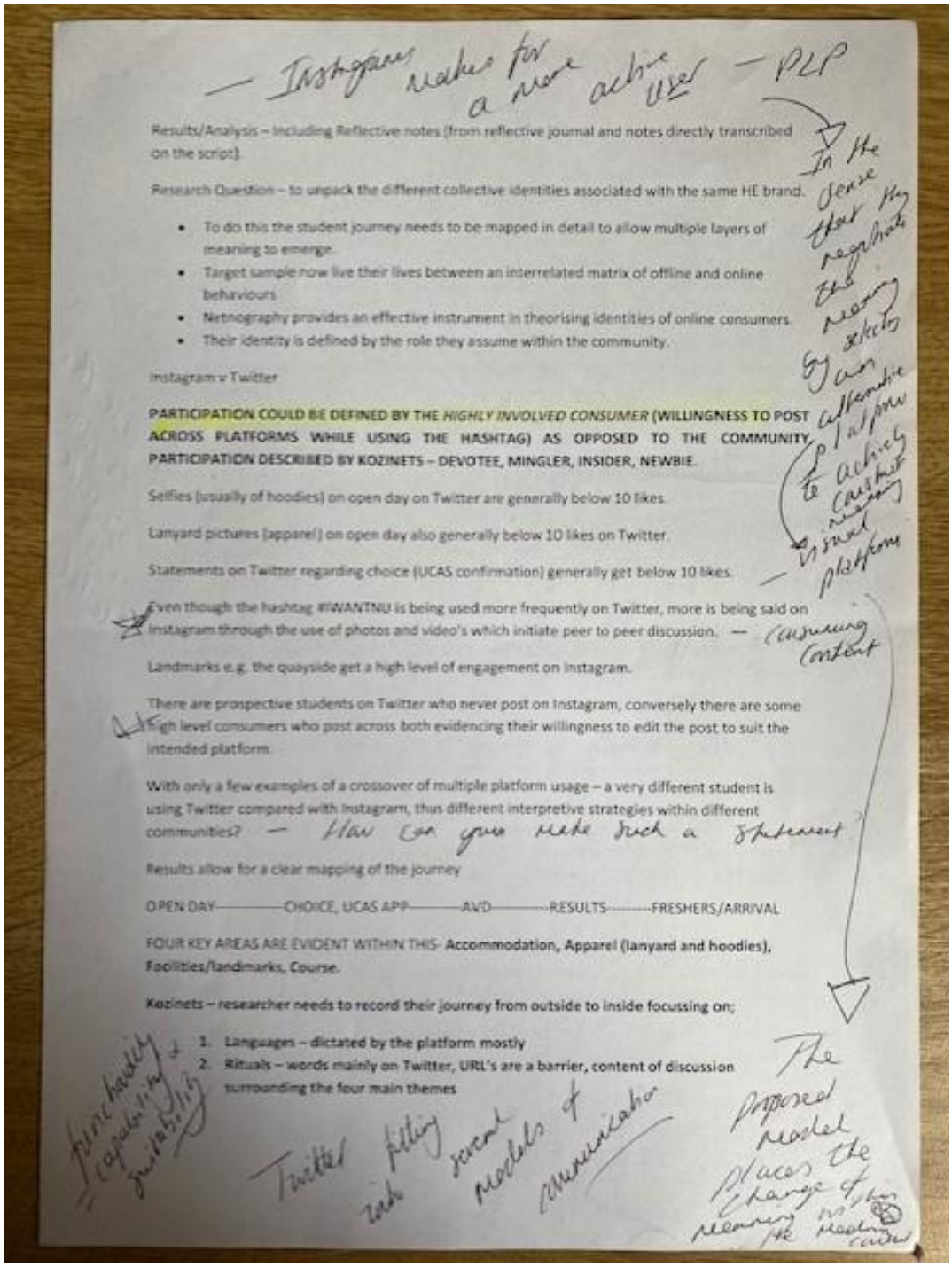
Twitter is not best placed to assist with the everyday construction of self, as it does not fully encourage peer-peer communication – Evidence suggests Instagram's functionality is better placed for this.

what evidence??

Does the audience often receive the message through the highly involved consumer? Who are individuals that pay close attention to the message and filter it through to others? So people receive the message without consuming the text?

Does Hall's model apply when the audience has chosen not to receive the message?

Is the model affected by developments in new technology? Yes, how?



— Instagram makes for a more active user — PLP

Results/Analysis – including Reflective notes (from reflective journal and notes directly transcribed on the script)

Research Question – to unpack the different collective identities associated with the same HE brand.

- To do this the student journey needs to be mapped in detail to allow multiple layers of meaning to emerge.
- Target sample now live their lives between an interrelated matrix of offline and online behaviours
- Netnography provides an effective instrument in theorising identities of online consumers.
- Their identity is defined by the role they assume within the community.

Instagram v Twitter

PARTICIPATION COULD BE DEFINED BY THE *HIGHLY INVOLVED CONSUMER* (WILLINGNESS TO POST ACROSS PLATFORMS WHILE USING THE HASHTAG) AS OPPOSED TO THE COMMUNITY. PARTICIPATION DESCRIBED BY KOZINETS – DEVOTEE, MINGLER, INSIDER, NEWBIE.

Selfies (usually of hoodies) on open day on Twitter are generally below 10 likes.

Lanyard pictures (apparel) on open day also generally below 10 likes on Twitter.

Statements on Twitter regarding choice (UCAS confirmation) generally get below 10 likes.

Even though the hashtag #IWANTNU is being used more frequently on Twitter, more is being said on Instagram through the use of photos and video's which initiate peer to peer discussion. — (curating content)

Landmarks e.g. the quayside get a high level of engagement on Instagram.

There are prospective students on Twitter who never post on Instagram, conversely there are some high level consumers who post across both evidencing their willingness to edit the post to suit the intended platform.

With only a few examples of a crossover of multiple platform usage – a very different student is using Twitter compared with Instagram, thus different interpretive strategies within different communities? — How can you make such a statement

Results allow for a clear mapping of the journey

OPEN DAY————CHOICE, UCAS APP————AVD————RESULTS————FRESHERS/ARRIVAL

FOUR KEY AREAS ARE EVIDENT WITHIN THIS- **Accommodation, Apparel (lanyard and hoodies), Facilities/landmarks, Course.**

Kozinets – researcher needs to record their journey from outside to inside focussing on;

1. **Languages – dictated by the platform mostly**
2. **Rituals – words mainly on Twitter, URL's are a barrier, content of discussion surrounding the four main themes**

In the sense that by negotiating the meaning affects by our affordance of/on to achieve (author) meaning within platform

The proposed model places the change of meaning within the reading (author)

Twitter fitting into social models of communication

3. **Sites – the SM sites of Twitter and Instagram to follow the community users of hashtag #WANTNU**
4. **Information – accommodation, course, hoodie, facilities**
5. **People – prospective undergraduate students (all mature and pg info discarded) of Northumbria University.**
6. **Topics – responses to and interpretations of #IWANTNU**
7. **Practices – personal admissions**
8. **Meanings – underlying vulnerability/anxiousness throughout the posts – a sense of is admissions viewing these post?**

Social media has fundamentally altered previous beliefs regarding consumption and communication ——— you can be passive and active at the same time ——— so does this throw greater emphasis on levels of participation e.g. the highly involved consumer? As such, does this alter the interpretive strategies adopted by certain consumer groups?

Social media is changing the interpretation of a message ——— is it moving the decode further away from the encode???? The platform/device itself is changing the interpretation of the message, the medium is playing an active role in the interpretation of the message.

Use this to come up with new model

Functionality —— Removing the barriers to accessing information

Segmenting the consumer group ——

To identify the diverse interpretive strategies employed within a relevant interpretive community to decode potential meanings and co-create similar actual meanings to drive the narrative. An individual of the same brand might operate different decoding strategies in relation to the same message (Morley).

Audit trail/Reflective Notes to evidence a robust method.

Twitter is unique in its context as it has a character limit 40 on tweets of only 140 characters. This means conversation flows differently to how it would, firstly in person, and secondly, on any other social media platform.

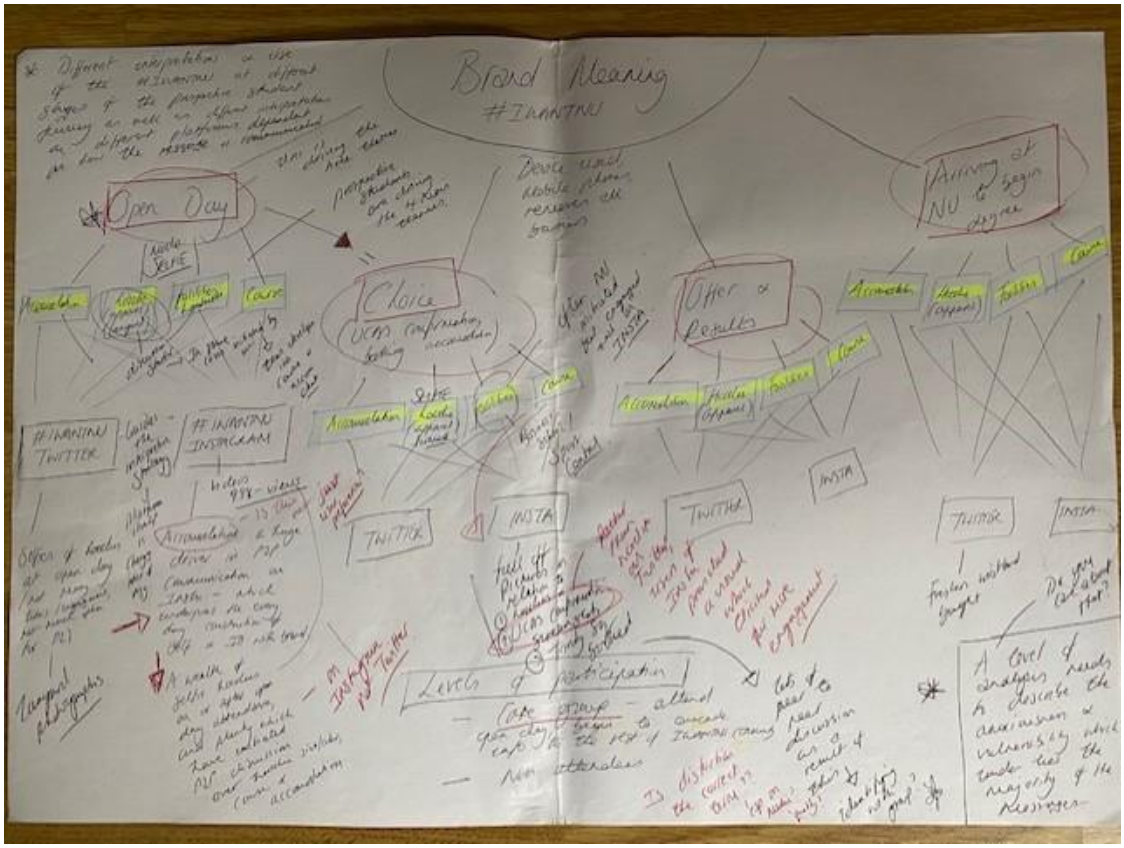
Further, with this limited character count consumers can utilize 'emojis' to display emotion and make the tone of the conversation more clear. The use of these emojis is relevant to the netnography study to gain an understanding of tone, appreciation and perceived value.

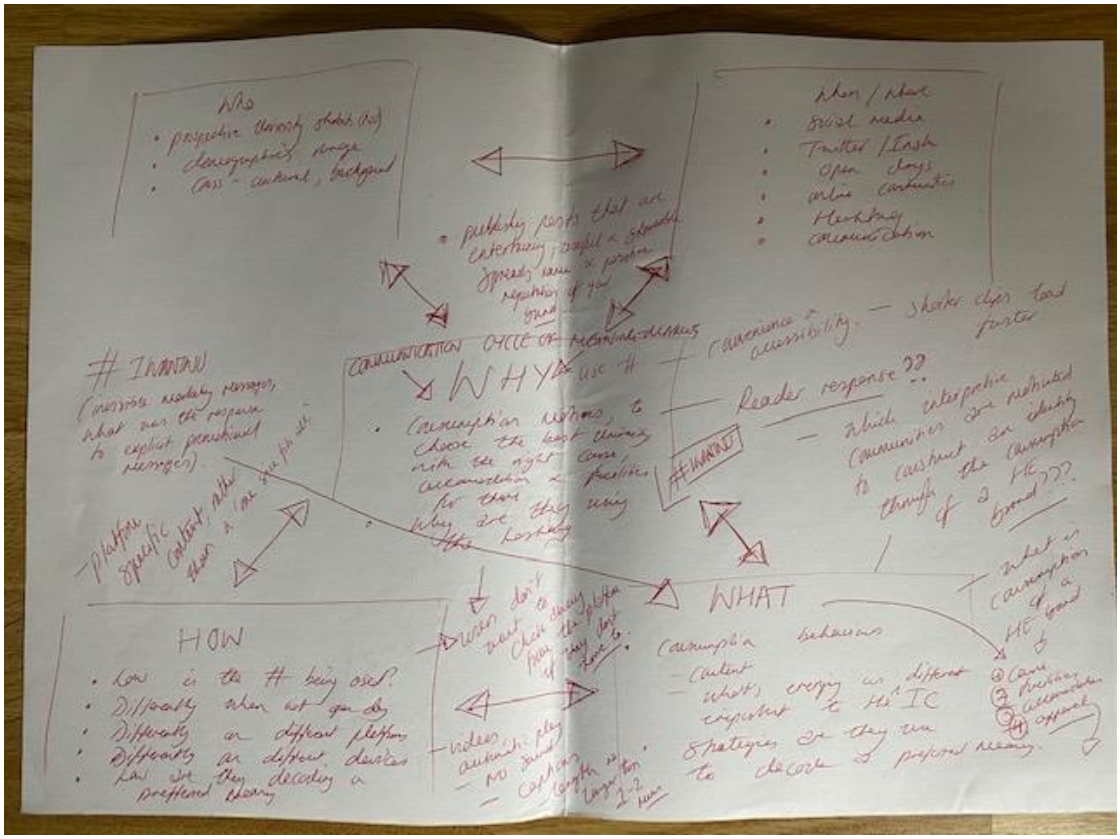
Hashtag as a community? Not bounded therefore it is hard to analyse levels of participation as described by kozinets because students usually only post once. Apart from a few who have been identified across the # on different platforms as highly involved others have posted singularly.

Co-creation of the message is far more prevalent on Instagram than Twitter. Less NU initiated messages driving the narrative and more about the context and time in their journey driving the message.

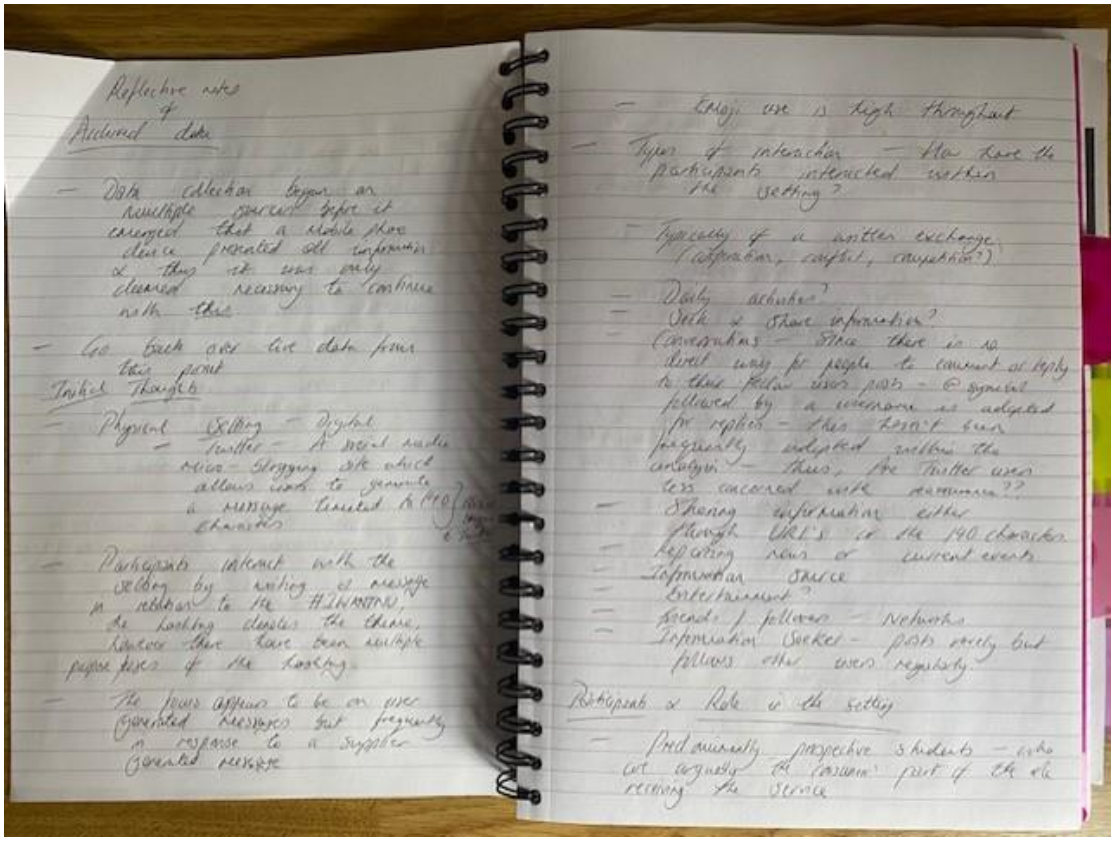

Top Tweets
All Tweets
September? Follow us to keep up to date with everything happening on campus, accommodation and more! #IWANTNU
[redacted]
Room all booked and confirmed!! @TrinitySquareNU #IWANTNU
Trinity Square @TrinitySq... 18/02/2016
See you soon !!!!! #IWANTNU
[redacted]
Can't wait to go to uni now!! Even more excited to live in Trinity Square it looks amazing #IWANTNU

A2. Visual Representation of Emerging Themes Across the Journey





A3. Excerpts of Reflective Journal Maintained for Duration of Immersion in #IWANTNU Community



APPENDIX B – Supporting Documentation for Initial Purchase Stage

B1. Profiling Questionnaire

Promotional Questionnaire

Q1. What is your name?

Q2. What is your age?

18 19 20 21 22 23+

Q3. What is your gender?

Female Male

Q4. Where are you from?

Q5. Did you complete A-Levels or BTEC'S?

A-Levels BTEC's

Q6. What course are you doing?

Sport Development

Sport Management

Sport Coaching

Q7. Do you know anyone on your course? Please circle;

Yes No

Q8. Do you like sport? Please circle;

Yes No

Q9. What sport/s do you play?

Q10. Which sports team/s do you watch/follow?

Q11. Do you intend to play sport at University? If so, which one?

Yes, which sport? _____

No

Q12. Do you know anyone who plays sport at University level?

Yes No

Q13. Do you use social media?

Yes No

Q14. Which social media platforms would you say you used the most? Please Circle;

Any other forms of social media which are not listed

Q15. Did you use social media to inform you when deciding upon your University choice?

Yes No

Q16. Have you ever interacted with the University on social media? E.g. liked or commented on a post?

Yes No

Q17. Since accepting your offer onto your degree programme have you discussed any aspect of University life on social media?

Yes No

Q18. Are you aware of the hashtag #IWANTNU? Yes No

Q.19. Please circle below the top three brands you currently use the most;

Q20. Describe yourself in few words

Would you like to have the opportunity to discuss this further? If so please provide your email address below:

B2. Focus Group Interview Schedule

Introduction to Focus Groups

Hello and welcome to our session. My name is Kimberley Hardcastle. I am very grateful to you all for sparing time to talk about your student journey so far.

How are things going with your course/university life so far? Is Everyone good?

The purpose of this focus group is to explore who you are as student consumers, I want to know why you are at Northumbria, how do you define yourself and what it means to be a Northumbria University sport student. This will enable a greater understanding of the communities, which exist within Universities and provide me with a greater understanding of how you the student likes to communicate and how you make sense of messages from the University.

You were invited along to this focus group because you meet the criteria for the study and have expressed an interest in this research.

There are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view especially if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that I'm just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are just as helpful. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel.

You have probably noticed the microphone. I am tape-recording the session because I do not want to miss any of your comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions and I cannot write fast enough to get them all down. We will be on a first name basis today, and we will not use any names in our reports.

Opinions expressed will be treated in confidence among project staff for the purpose of establishing a base of evidence in response to the research question of the study. All responses will remain anonymous. You are assured of complete confidentiality.

For ethical reasons participants will be asked to sign a Participation Consent Form, containing the following sections:

- I have been given an explanation of the nature and purpose of the study.
- I understand what I will need to do to take part and my questions have been answered satisfactorily.
- I have the contact details for the staff involved.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself and my data at any time, without consequences.
- I am satisfied with the arrangements to ensure that it will not be possible for me to be identified when the results are made available.

The researcher will go through this information with each participant and ask them to sign the form.

Phone etiquette/name cards

Demographic Info of the students?

Discussion 1 – Your student journey

Q1. Why did you choose Northumbria University?

Q2. Have you attempted to make friends with other fresher's either online or in person before coming to Northumbria?

Q3. Is there anything about your student journey so far which has made you feel anxious or vulnerable? Do you feel anxious/vulnerable? What about the future? What is important to you about your university life/experience?

Discussion 2 – Northumbria University brand - brand value and co-creation

Q4. What is your perception of Northumbria University? (Prompt – reputation, is it a sport university to you? Or have you come for the course, Newcastle, any other reason?)

Q5. What does it mean to you to be a part of Northumbria University? (Prompt – what's important in your university life right now?)

Discussion 3 – Informational Exchange with Northumbria University and others

Q6. Did you use social media to seek information to help you decide on your university choice? Which University social media accounts do you follow? Why?

Q7. Have you ever interacted with Northumbria university on social media? E.g. liked, commented or re-tweeted a post? If not how do you communicate with the University? Do you prefer words or pictures as a feature? How do you make sense of some content – produce an example.

Q8. Would you post something like this? Produce a document with tweets and posts from Instagram/Twitter regarding the #IWANTNU – (Prompt - Have you ever used the #IWANTNU? Do you use hashtags?)

Discussion 4 – Social Media Usage

Q9. Do you interact on social media or do you just observe feeds and posts? (Prompt - How do you engage with content?)

Q10. Which social media platforms do you live your lives on? (Prompt – break down frequency of use, do you have different purposes for different platforms (provide an example if required e.g. Facebook for family, Instagram for photos due to enhanced photo editor)? What are they?)

Q11. Take some time to think about the types of things you post on social media, what are the purposes of your posts on social media? (Prompt - information seeking, personal admission, opinion based, complaining, re-assurance, entertainment? And are they different depending on the audience?)

Q12. Does the device you use change the way you behave on social media? (Prompt – if you use a mobile and a URL link is provided rather than the info already presented, would you class this as a barrier to seeking that information?)

Discussion 5 – Identity

Researcher keep in mind you are looking for responses which highlight how identity is produced, negotiated, affirmed and reinforced.

Q13. What identity are you? Who are you? Describe yourself…..

Q14. Does social media allow you to create an identity which is not constricted by factors you would find in everyday life? Does it provide you with more freedom? Or do you find it hard to maintain your identity on multiple platforms and as such limits what you can do?

Q15. How do you see your identity developing at University? (Prompt – where do you see yourself in a month? Two months? End of semester one?) ask if they have or plan to construct a new identity for university life?

Discussion 6 – Sport

Note added after Focus Group 1 - see if they offer it as part of their choice of NU, and their identity and interaction before you ask questions about it directly. Note if they have discussed this voluntarily before you signpost them towards it.

Q16. Do you currently play for a sports team? (Prompt - What level? What is your role within the team?)

Q17. Are you going to play for a sports team whilst studying at Northumbria? Why? What do you think it will be like playing sport for a University sport team? (Prompt e.g. members behaviours, stereotypes, apparel, initiation) How have you created that perception?

Q18. How much does sport impact your identity? (Prompt –do you refer to sport fairly early on in a conversation when someone asks what do you do, what are your interests? has sport impacted your decision to come to Northumbria?)

Closing Comments – Is there anything I have missed? What is the most important point we discussed today?

Summarise discussion and thank participants for their time as well as collecting

B3. Focus Group Consent Form

A GENERIC INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title:

Engaging the consumer: A study of the student journey within the English HE sector, as defined by the sport consumer.

Principal Investigator:

Kimberley Hardcastle

Investigator email:Kimberley.hardcastle@northumbria.ac.uk

	please tick or initial where applicable
I have carefully read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.	☐
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study and I have received satisfactory answers.	☐
I understand I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason for withdrawing, and without prejudice.	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐

Signature of participant..... Date.....…….. (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….
Signature of Parent / Guardian in the case of a minor .....
Signature of researcher..... Date.....…….. (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….

FOR USE WHEN PHOTOGRAPHS/VIDEOS/TAPE RECORDINGS WILL BE TAKEN

Project title: Engaging the consumer: An ethnographic study of the student journey within the English HE sector, as defined by the sport consumer.

Principal Investigator: Kimberley Hardcastle

I hereby confirm that I give consent for the following recordings to be made:

Recording	Purpose	Consent
Voice Recording	*Each focus group discussion will be recorded to allow the researcher to code and analyse the data collected.*	

Clause A: I understand that other individuals may be exposed to the recording(s) and be asked to provide ratings/judgments. The outcome of such ratings/judgments

will not be conveyed to me. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s).

Tick or initial the box to indicate your consent to Clause A ☐

Clause B: I understand that the recording(s) may also be used for teaching/research purposes and may be presented to students/researchers in an educational/research context. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s).

Tick or initial the box to indicate your consent to Clause B ☐

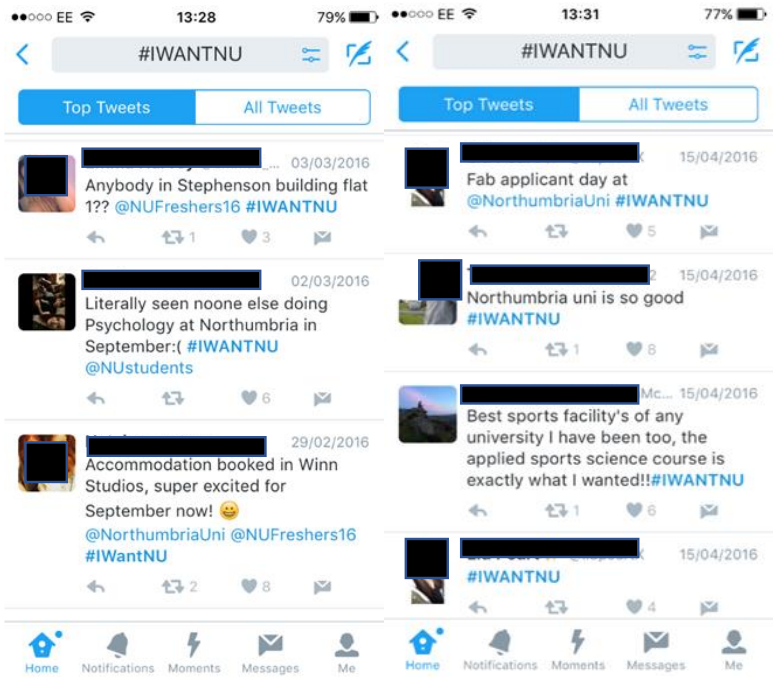
Clause C: I understand that the recording(s) may be published in an appropriate journal/textbook or on an appropriate Northumbria University webpage, **which would automatically mean that the recordings would potentially be available worldwide**. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s). I understand that I have the right to withdraw consent at any time prior to publication, but that once the recording(s) are in the public domain there may be no opportunity for the effective withdrawal of consent

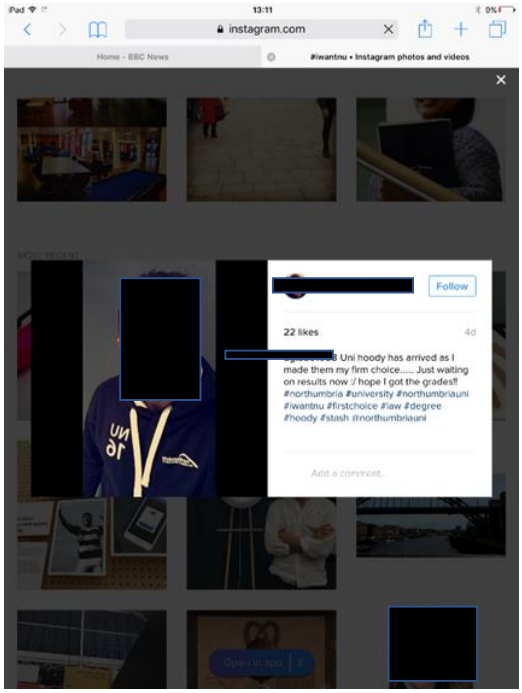
Tick or initial the box to indicate your consent to Clause C ☐

Signature of participant..... Date.....……..

B4. Reader Response Tweets

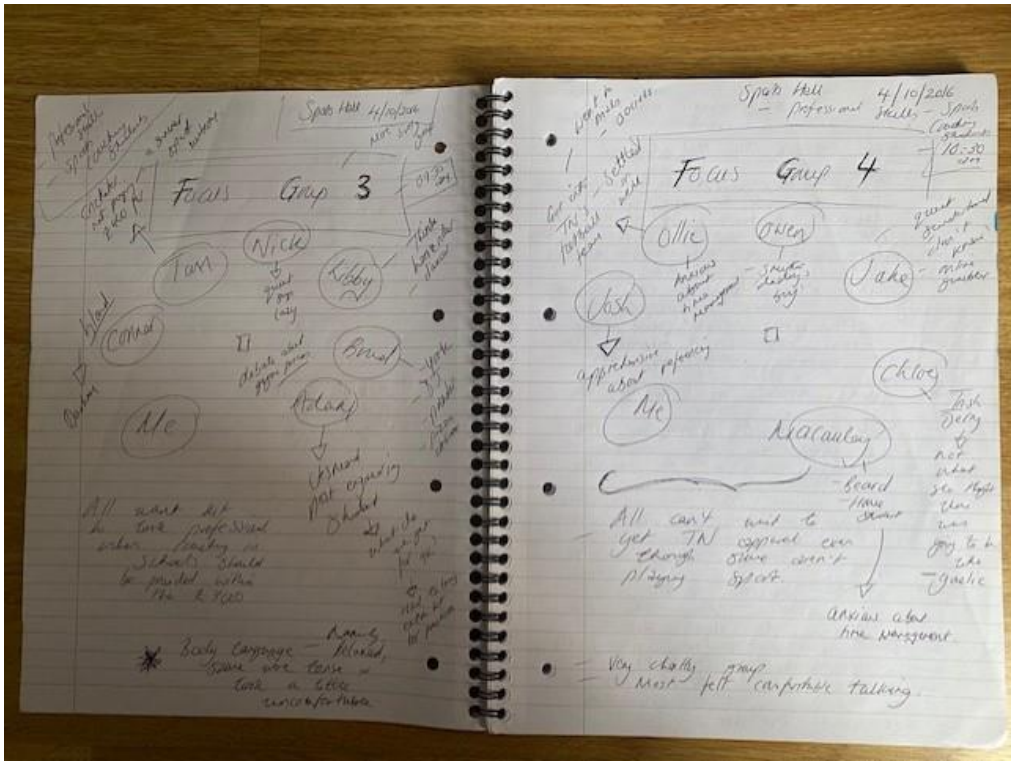
Focus group participants shown these posts and asked ‘what do you think of these posts? would you post something like this’:

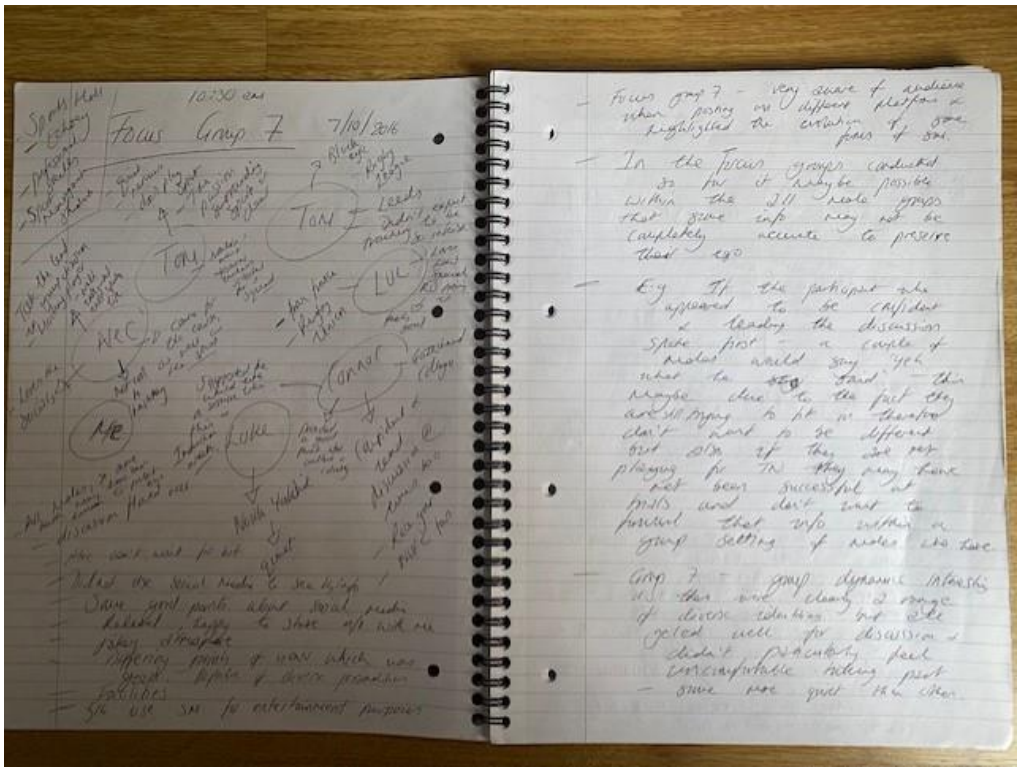




B5. Researcher Field Notes for Focus Groups

Focus group field notes and reflective notes of elements which assisted analysis such as passionate comments, body language of participants, non-verbal activity, dominant speakers and position of speakers/participants throughout discussion.





APPENDIX C– Supporting Documentation for Established Consumption Stage

C1. Profiling Questionnaire

Profiling Survey

1. Name:

2. University email address:

3. Age:

4. Gender:

5. Where are you from:

6. Do you play for Team Northumbria? Please circle;

   Yes No

7. Is it a team sport on an individual sport?

8. Which sport do you play?

9. How long have you been playing this sport?

10. Do you play this sport outside of Team Northumbria as well? If so who for and how regularly?

11. Will you be attending the Stan Calvert 2018 Finale day on Sunday the 25th of February?

    Yes No

12. Will you be playing in any Stan Calvert 2018 matches?

    Yes No

13. What are your top three sport brands?

14. Do you wear branded Team Northumbria clothing?

    Yes No

15. Do you wear branded standard Northumbria University clothing?

    Yes No

16. Did you participate in some kind of initiation event?

    Yes No

17. Would you say you are fully involved in all aspects of Northumbria University? E.g. go training, play matches, go on socials, initiation, communicate regularly with teammates?

C2. Interview Schedule

When does the brand become a brand? At what point does the brand begin to matter on the journey?

Capturing the Journey

1. Describe yourself when you started at Northumbria University? What sports did you play, what activities were you involved in? What did you like, who did you gather with? What did you wear? How did you feel about starting your degree?
    - **a.** How do you see yourself now? Have you made any changes? To your accent/speech? Altitudes? Or the way you dressed? Types of activities you do in your spare time? Altered characteristics of the tribe/team/community/other students to fit in?
        - i. Were there huge differences about what you thought your first year student journey would be like? Why? Who / what has informed the changes that you have just discussed? If they have just happened, why do you thing they have happened – has it been a deliberate choice. Do you think that others have also made those choices – who was the first to change in your friendship group/team/course?
        - ii. Are there any changes that you have made that you are especially happy about? When did these changes happen? First few months or later? What was going on at the time?
        - iii. Do you participate in group activities? What are you part of? Are there any changes that you have had to make just to fit into a social group/team?

2. Can you tell me about the early initiation events you were involved in when you first joined (this could be anything from induction, first seminar, first training practice, first social, first game)?
    - **a.** How would they take place? Did you expect that? Why/not?
    - **b.** Did these change any of your behaviours – for example did you feel that you were now more part of the tribe than before the induction?
    - **c.** Was there anyone who did not do it? How were they treated?

3. Can you explain if/how involvement in sport at university has impacted your journey? What does it mean to you?

4. What about if you had not been involved in sport (had not been selected; had not participated in the initiation), do you think that would have influenced how you describe yourself as a student?

Event experience –

5. Have you attended any university sport events this academic year? For example Stan Calvert? The big one? Netball super league? Describe the event.

6. Tell me about why/not you attended the event? Did it make you feel further part of the university/a tribe/ university sport? How so?
7. Describe yourself at the event?
    a. What did you wear – Team Northumbria apparel? Why?
        b. Who did you go with? A team? Your halls friends? Your course friends? How did they impact the game for you? What did they think?

<u>Identity Construction</u>

8. Explain how you feel about being part of Northumbria University? Why do you feel that way? What does it mean to you to be a part of Northumbria University? What do you value the most about Northumbria University? What do your friends think about Northumbria? Do you think like that too? Why/not?

9. When did you first hear about Northumbria? How did you hear about NU? What was your perception of Northumbria University when you started? The reputation, is it a sport university to you? Or have you come for the course, facilities, Newcastle, any other reason? Has this perception changed at all throughout your first year? What about now?

10. If someone asked you why Northumbria, what would you say? What attributes/personality would you include associated with Northumbria? How is it different from other universities? E.g. successful, high class, friendly, a market leader?

11. Would you recommend someone to come to Northumbria University (Loyalty)? If so, how would you promote/describe the university to them? How would you describe Northumbria to a friend?

12. Do you believe there is such a thing as a Team Northumbria/university sport community? Describe it to me?

13. Do you feel part of Team Northumbria/university sport community? Describe how it feels to be part of TN? Would you say you have more of an attachment to TN than the university itself? Why/not?

14. Explain your journey with Team Northumbria/university sport? How did it start? Is it what you expected?
    a. Do you see it as separate to your journey at university of part of it? In what way??
    b. What has influenced this? Friends?
    c. Did the event impact this? Why/not?
    d. Do you view Team Northumbria as a representation/extension of yourself with similar values? Why/not? More so than Northumbria university?

15. Describe the team you play for?
    a. What was the stereotypical image of the group before you joined?
    b. What about initiation events? Were your early thoughts of the group accurate or misplaced?

c. Within the group do you all act the same way or do some of you behave in a different way to others?

16. Have you taken on any new roles within your team/course/Uni/accommodation since starting? How has that made you feel? – did you give off the impression that you knew what you were doing and how to be part of the team more than what was actually the case? E.g. did you wear TN kit at times when you perhaps normally wouldn't in order to fit in more quickly with the group? Why/not? Is it important for you to have your role/position in the group both on the field and off the field confirmed by the more experienced members of the group? Why/not? Has this helped you to create an identity?

17. Would you consider yourself to be full involved in all aspects of university life? Explain what you think is meant by full involvement? (involvement with the brand too)

University sport and Northumbria University branded clothing.

18. Do you wear branded Northumbria University or University sport/TN clothing? Which one? Why/not? If participant wear both – structure questions accordingly.
    - **a.** Where do you wear it? If not at university then why? Has the way you wear it changed since starting your journey? E.g. did you use to wear it on campus but not anymore? Why?
    - **b.** What does it mean to you wearing university clothing? Describe how you feel wearing it? Representing the brand? An identity? Do you share similar values?
    - **c.** Do you wear Northumbria/TN branded clothing in a non-Northumbria setting? Why/not?
    - **d.** Is there expectation that you wear it all – who expects you to wear it?
    - **e.** Do your friends wear Northumbria/TN branded clothing? What do they think – do you think like that? What courses are your friends on? What do you think about their course?
    - **f.** Describe the characteristics of people who wear TN/NU branded apparel? Are you one of them?
    - **g.** Do you believe what you think of yourself is reflected by what you wear?
    - **h.** Does wearing TN/NU clothing help you fit in or differentiate you?
    - **i.** Describe your status within university sport? Beginner, intermediate, expert, leader? Are you comfortable with your status? Why? Seeking to change this status? Does apparel change this status? Does wearing TN apparel represents your status? Do you feel you are just a bit better than someone else if you have a TN hoodie on and they don't?
    - **j.** Can you describe to me your use of branded clothing? E.g. do you wear it for functional reasons – practical and useful? Or is it for image purposes? Does it have meaning beyond what the clothing can do for you?

19. As you have developed as a university sport player and as a student, has your need to display connection with the Northumbria the University decreased? E.g. not wearing apparel as such behaviour deemed not cool? Why? Do you feel like it's a balancing act e.g. do not want to wear branded clothing on campus but will happily wear it at home.

20. In what way do you think Northumbria/TN branded clothing is related to the image you want to display? What are you communicating by wearing branded clothing? Are they the same – TN V NU clothing?

21. Would you buy the university sport branded clothing if you were not playing for them? Why/not? What are your thoughts on the free hooded jumper Northumbria distributed when you confirmed?

Sources of Information

22. Have you ever interacted with Northumbria University on social media? E.g. liked, commented or re-tweeted a post, watched a video? If not how do you communicate with the University?

23. Do you follow any of the university/university sport accounts? Why/not – what are your thoughts on the content they post? Does it interest you? Does it help you? Can you think of any examples or do you tend not to notice what the university are posting?

24. Where and who do you tend to get your information from about the university/university sport? Why did you retrieve your information this way? Do your friends do this too?

25. How do you tend to communicate with your friends/team/course group/accommodation? Who informs this communication? Was your group made more accessible by social media? Tell me about who influences decisions in your group/team? Dos the university initiate any discussion? Does this influence your thoughts? Do you generally think the same as your friends/group? Why/not?

26. Do you tend to initiate (lead) discussion or do you prefer it when others drive the discussion (follow)? – give me an example of this?

27. Do you ever notice ads when you are scrolling through various social media newsfeeds? Which ones? What makes them stand out?

28. Have you heard of the #IWANTNU? Where and when? Do you know what it stands for? Can you think of any other hashtags which are associated with Northumbria University or Northumbria sport? Do you use them?

Marketing and Brand Meaning - Is the brand important?

29. Think about ads you see on all communication channels, can you give me an example of a good or bad advertising campaign, take your time, can be sport but doesn't have to be, could be absolutely anything – a brand you love or hate. Why? What made it so good? Are there any adverts which you really love/hate?

30. Spend some time thinking about your favourite brand –

    a. What is the first brand that comes to your mind?
    b. What characteristics of this brand makes it recognizable?
    c. How often have you seen this brand in the past month?

d. Where have you seen it?
e. What makes this brand more recognizable than competing brands?
f. Do your friends buy the same brands as you? Who bought it first?

31. Can you explain what marketing means to you? What would you recognise as marketing? Any examples specifically from TN/NU? Would your peer group (friends / family) agree with your assessment? – Why?

32. Tell me a bit about your thoughts on the marketing and promotion of universities?

33. Which of the following logos do you recognise?

    See logo visuals at the end of interview

    a. What comes to mind for each logo? What makes them different? What type of personality does each logo have?

34. When I mention Northumbria University the brand what is the first thing that comes to mind? Why? Do you see the Northumbria University as a brand? And a brand that you want to be associated with? Why/not? In the past three months, where have you seen or heard about the brand Northumbria?

35. Do you ever discuss brand meanings with your friends? For example, how being a NU student makes you feel - How influential are your friends on your purchasing of brands would you say?

36. What do you like about Northumbria University?

    a. What about TN/university sport? Is it a different brand to you?
    b. Does each brand have a different meaning to you?
    c. Which one is stronger in your opinion?
    d. What would you say your greatest affiliation is with? Is it Northumbria University or Team Northumbria? Or is it just team Northumbria, or even just your team? Or in your opinion does one automatically lead to membership within the other? Or do you perceive them as two separate entities? Why?

37. Think about when you decided to come to Northumbria University, describe the decision making process you went through to ensure you made the right decision about choosing Northumbria? What jumps out as a unique selling point to you? Remove the commodity from the brand element of the university – e.g. remove the

degree from Northumbria, what do is left that makes up the brand? What is the brand? Is it a brand?

- **a.** Did you sign up for Newcastle as a city? Why?
- **b.** Or did you sign up for Northumbria University?
- **c.** Explain what it means to be a Northumbria university student and not a Newcastle university student? What does Northumbria have vs competitor?
- **d.** Did you sign up for a faculty?
- **e.** When making those early decisions was accommodation important to you?
- **f.** Was your course important to you?
- **g.** Was sport important?
- **h.** What is the brand you are aligning yourself with? Is it Northumbria sport, Northumbria University or is it your faculty?

38. Would you say you made a fully informed decision to purchase a degree with Northumbria? How so? Were you aware of what you were purchasing and how it differentiates from other universities? Did you choose to come to Northumbria because of what the brand stood for or did the brand not matter to your decision making? Were you aware of the brand and what it means before you decided to come to Northumbria?
39. The New branding – What are your thoughts on the new brand which has been recently rolled out by Northumbria University? How does this differ to the brand you signed up to (if they did sign up to a brand at all?) How do you feel about the new hashtag #TakeOnTomorrow? The new logo? New colours? Has this altered any perceptions you previously had which you described before e.g. personality – more of a market leader, better quality?

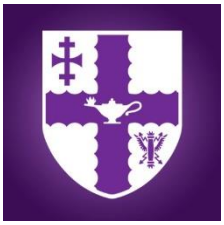
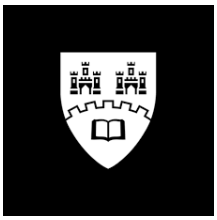
Closing Comments

Is there anything we have not covered in this interview which you would like to discuss or are there any points you would like to return to and elaborate further?

Summarise discussion and thank participant for their time as well as collecting all necessary consent forms.

Images for question 5 of marketing section – put on separate sheet?



northumbriasport

C3. Interview Consent Form

A GENERIC INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title:

Exploring the interpretive strategies employed throughout the student journey to understand to understand brand meaning and the impact of university sport.

Principal Investigator:

Kimberley Hardcastle

Investigator email:
kimberley.hardcastle@northumbria.ac.uk

	please tick or initial where applicable
I have carefully read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.	☐
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study and I have received satisfactory answers.	☐
I understand I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason for withdrawing, and without prejudice.	☐
I agree to take part in this study.	☐

Signature of participant..... Date.....…….. (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….
Signature of Parent / Guardian in the case of a minor .....
Signature of researcher..... Date.....…….. (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....…….

FOR USE WHEN PHOTOGRAPHS/VIDEOS/TAPE RECORDINGS WILL BE TAKEN

Project title: *Exploring the interpretive strategies employed throughout the student journey from pre-consumption to self-defined tribal identity.*

Principal Investigator: Kimberley Hardcastle

I hereby confirm that I give consent for the following recordings to be made:

Recording	Purpose	Consent
Voice Recording	*Each interview will be recorded to allow the researcher to code and analyse the data collected.*	

Clause A: I understand that other individuals may be exposed to the recording(s) and be asked to provide ratings/judgments. The outcome of such ratings/judgments will not be conveyed to me. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the recording(s).

Tick or initial the box to indicate your consent to Clause A ☐

Signature of participant..... Date.....……..

C4. Researcher Field Notes

Example excerpts of notes made during and immediately after individual interviews.

Notes on JA's Interview:

- Discussions from the outset emerge in relation to relationship building between student consumers – extended that initial core friendship group beyond the first few weeks to now include sports team's friends, flatmates friends. Expansion to different friendship groups.
- Experience has been very supportive with peers, collective.
- Segmenting friends into three different groups – netball, accommodation and course.
- Spending leisure time – SU and Library – facilities – making comparisons to home life and university life where bonding in groups takes place.
- Expectations – inconclusive? Changes don't seem as big compared to the initial expectations - making comparisons to other peer's experiences.
- Interaction in lectures is better than what she initially thought.
- Knowledge gained from these groups?
- Hanging around in peer groups with people who have similar interests.
- Find the group you want to associate with.
- Induction was a good time for forming groups.
- Netball initiation – dressed the same when you went out so you knew who to talk to.
- From social media you see pictures from uni initiation so you knew what to expect.
- Northumbria is known for the super league so you have two types of players – social and interested or just interested in playing.
- Opportunities and progressing through sport.
- Attended Stan Calvert as a spectator. An expectation that you should attended you should do it, the rivalry.
- Representing the brand? Made me feel further part of the university community.
- Apparel discussion again – stan calvert tops, black and red stripes on our faces.
- Bought the t shirts- it's a must!
- Facilities better at Northumbria compared to Newcastle.

Notes on A's Interview:

- Didn't meet people initial because I didn't enrol - anxious, sick every morning, self-conscious.
- Issues with building relationships – and getting information.
- Text, email accommodation pals.
- Can't remember induction or initial perceptions.
- Went to the super league game, it was ok. Wasn't much of an atmosphere. Went to experience it to see what a different sport was like.

- The course stands out.
- First heard about NU at high school, brothers friends. Recommendations.
- Reputation – good for sports.
- Lecturer friendliness, engaging.
- Small university that is big also.
- Location is an attribute.
- Obviously, Newcastle do not offer subjects Northumbria offer e.g. sport.
- Didn't apply for the free hoodie – doesn't feel fully part of the uni that is why says he wouldn't wear branded Northumbria stuff.
- People who wear TN stuff proud, ambassadors

APPENDIX D – DATA ANALYSIS

D1. Stage One analysis pre-purchase stage

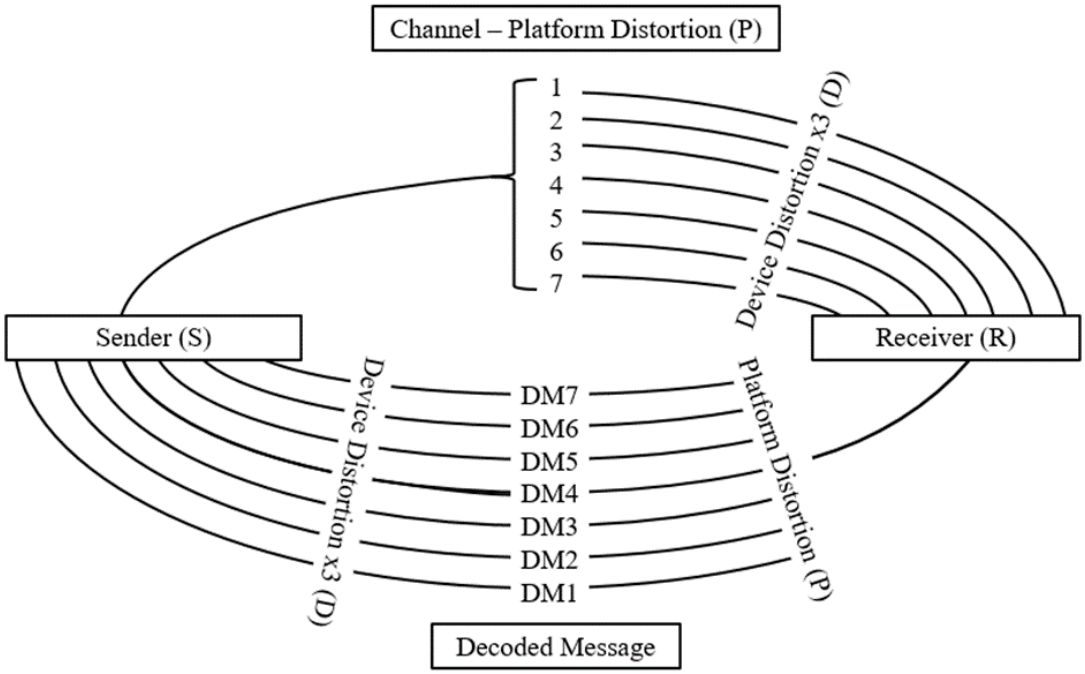


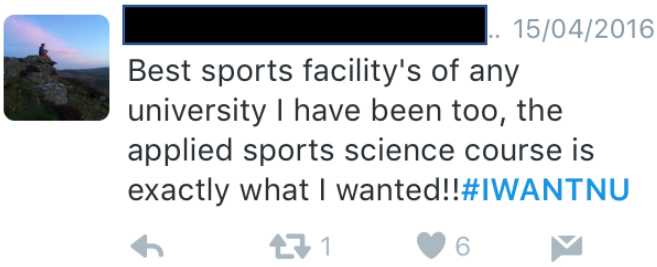
Figure demonstrating the complexity of communication in the social media environment section.

Screenshot 1 #IWANTNU

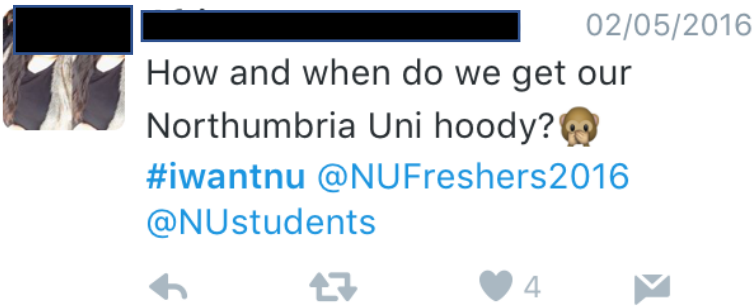
Screenshot 2 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 3 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 4 #IWANTNU

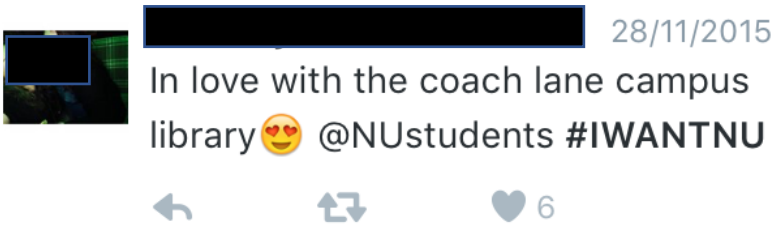


Screenshot 5 #IWANTNU

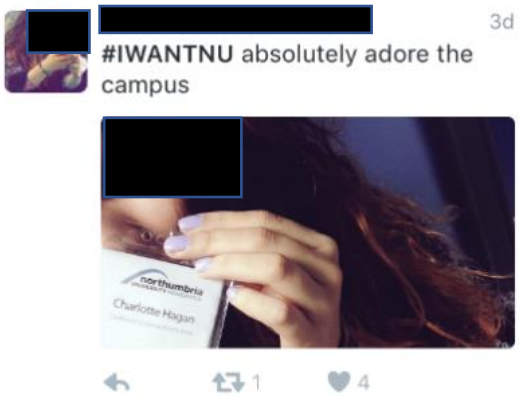


Screenshot 6 #IWANTNU

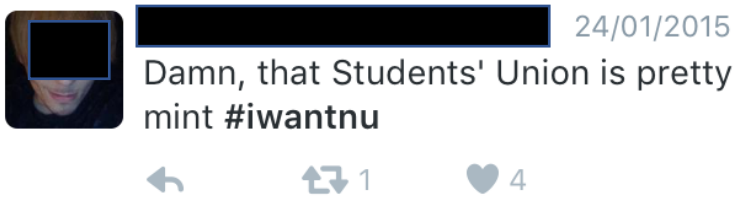
Screenshot 7 #IWANTNU



Screenshot 8 #IWANTNU



Screenshot 9 #IWANTNU



Screenshot 10 #IWANTNU

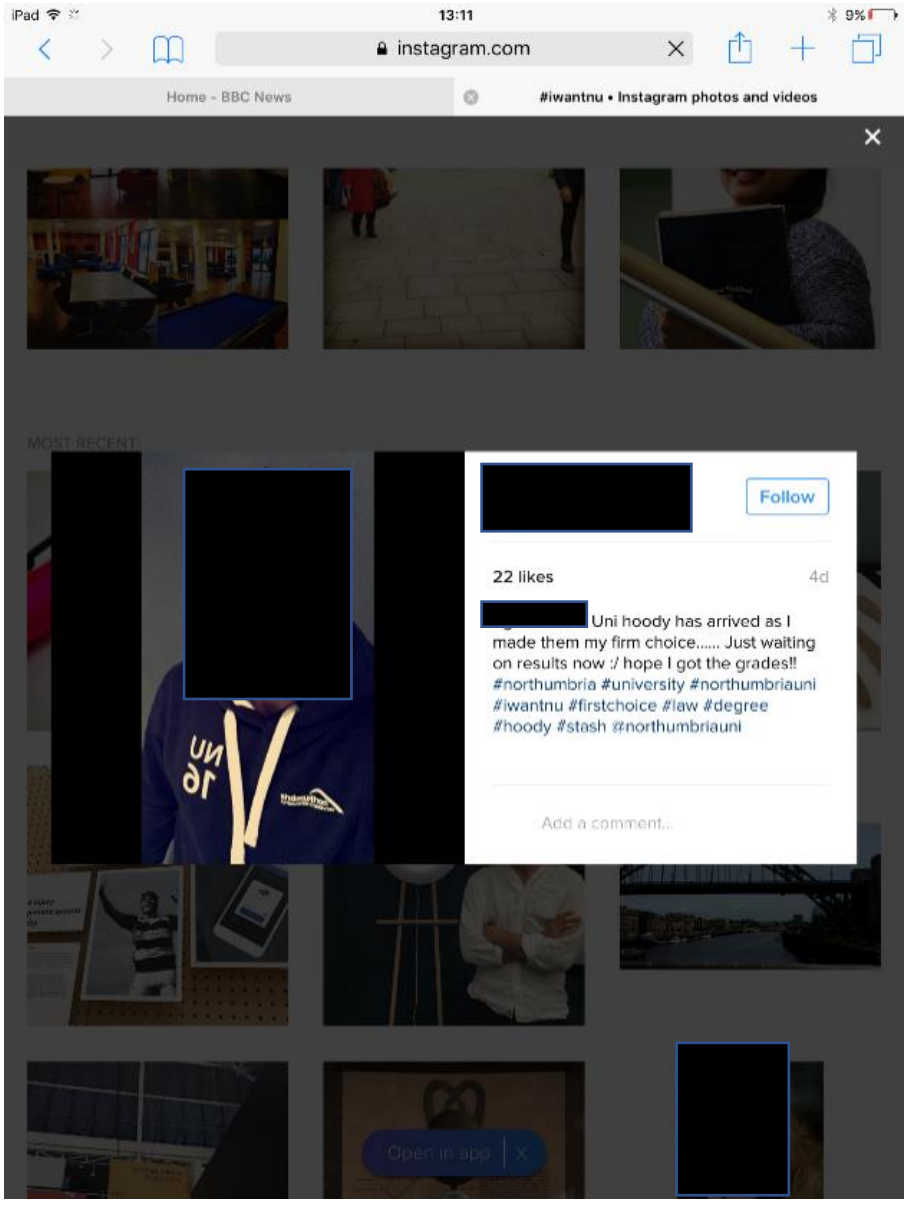
Screenshot 11 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 12 #IWANTNU

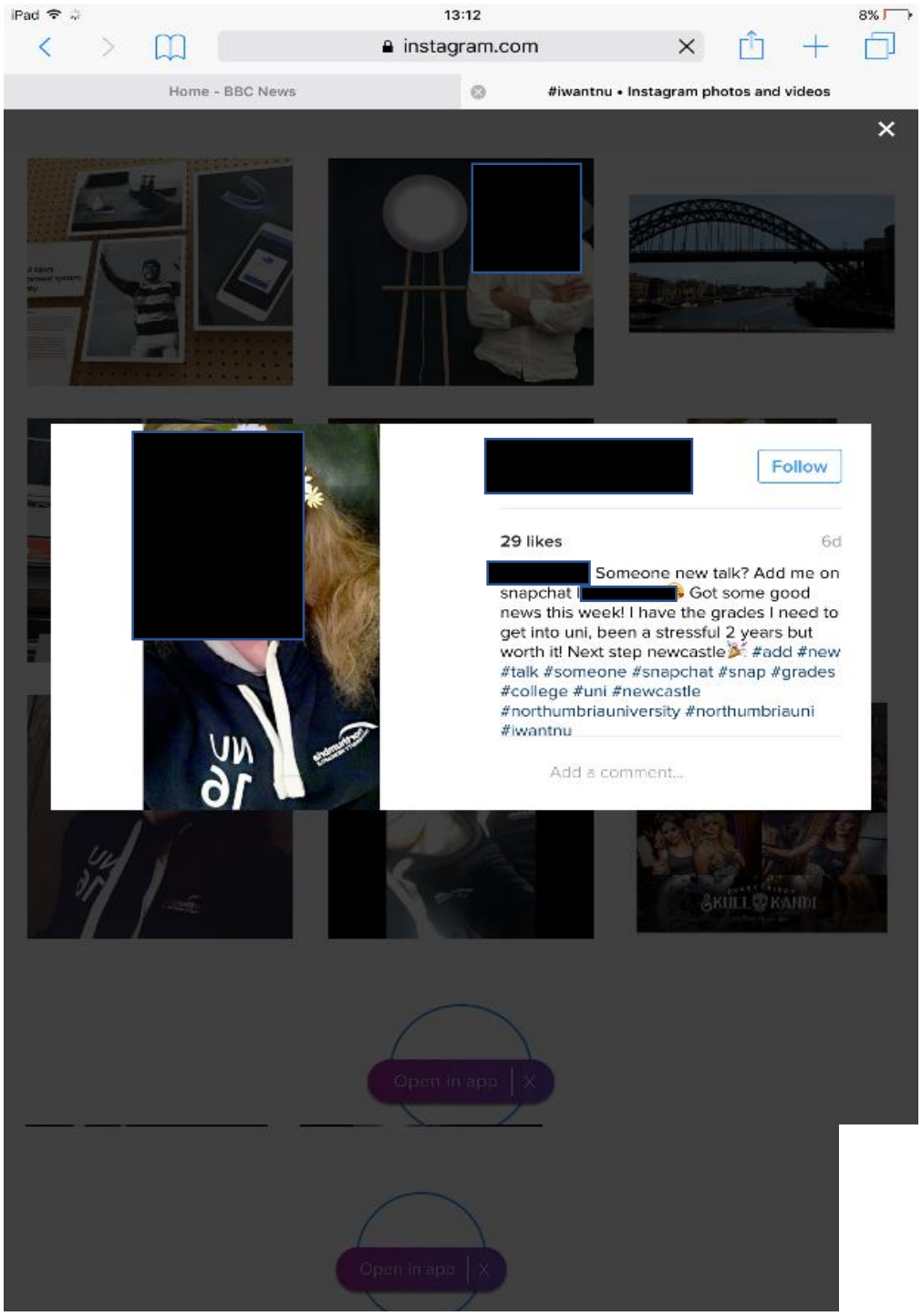
Screenshot 13 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 14 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 15 #IWANTNU



Screenshot 16 #IWANTNU



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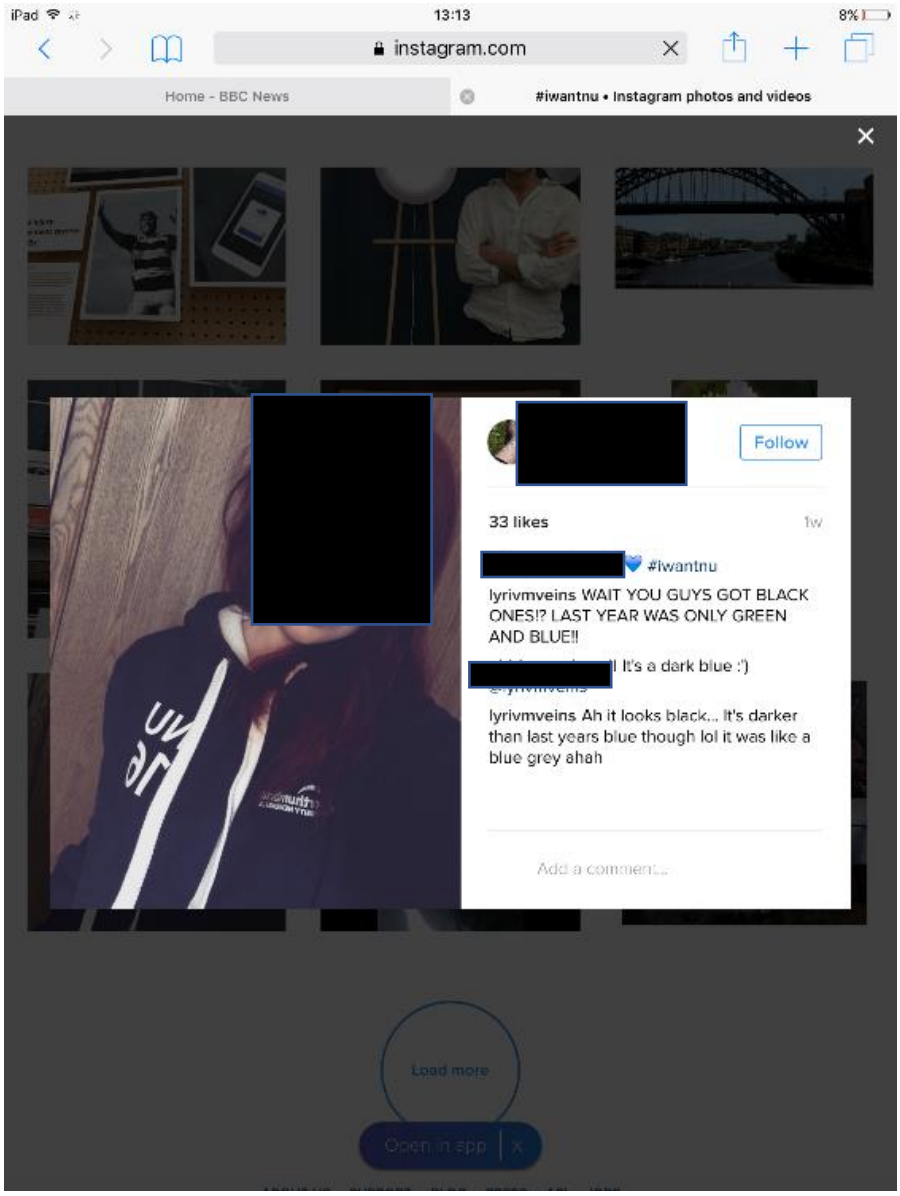
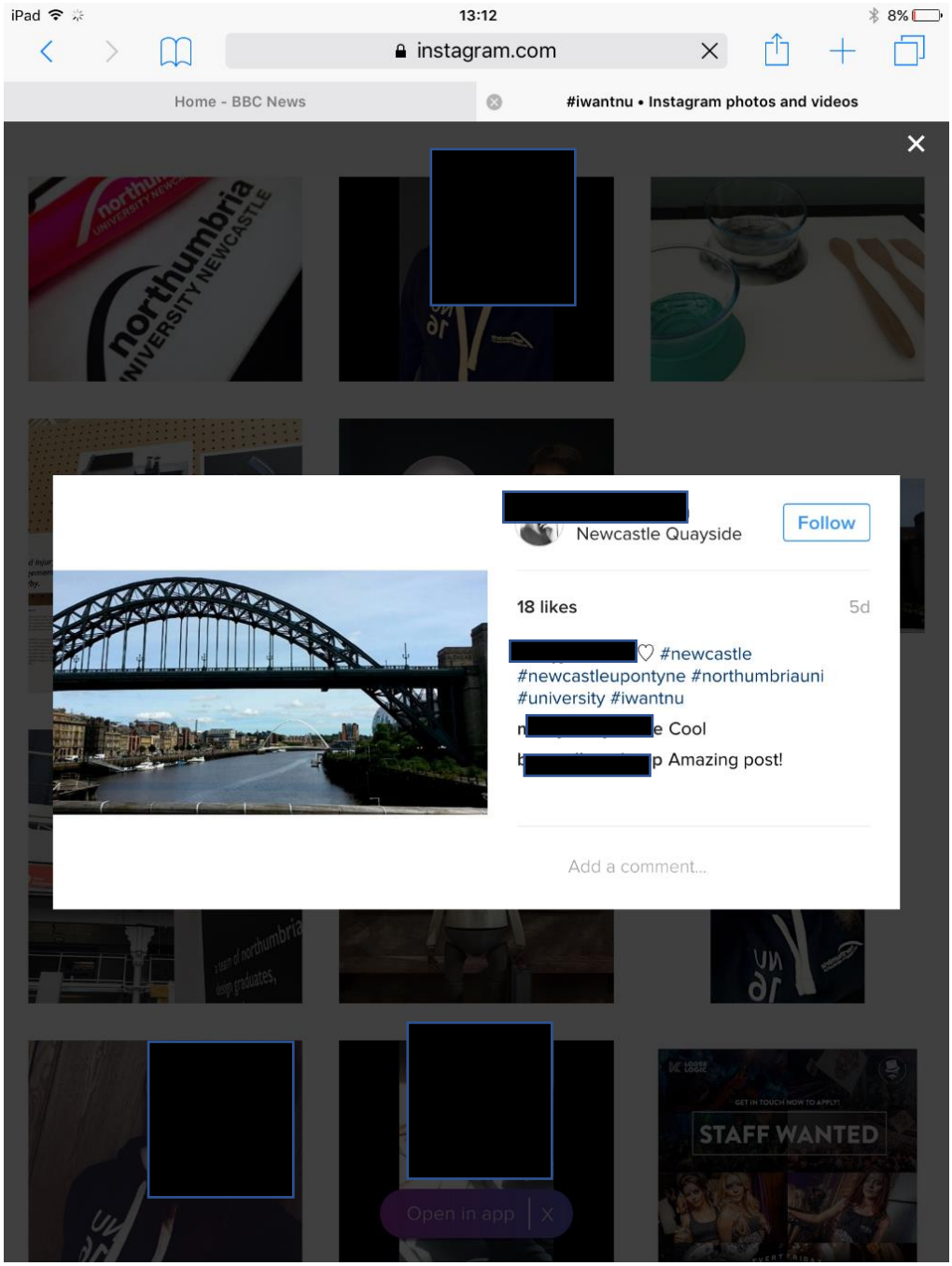
Screenshot 17 #IWANTNU

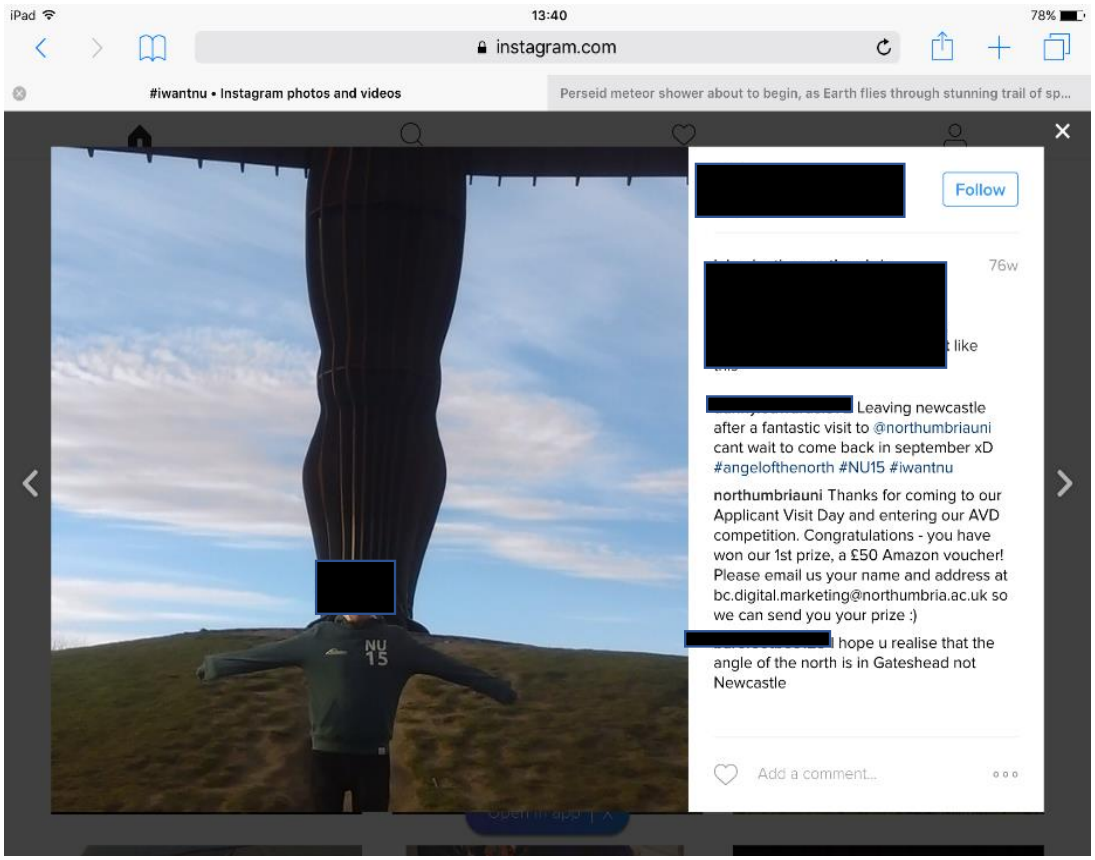


Screenshot 18 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 19 #IWANTNU



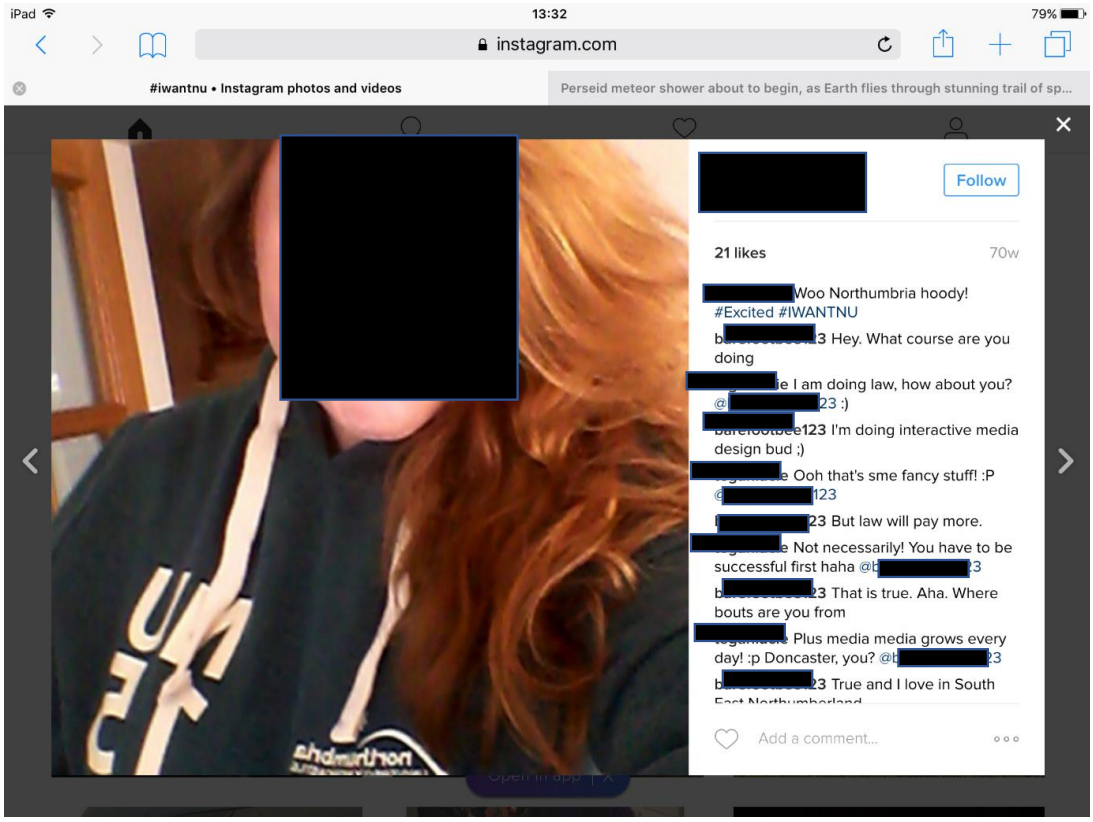
Screenshot 20 #IWANTNU



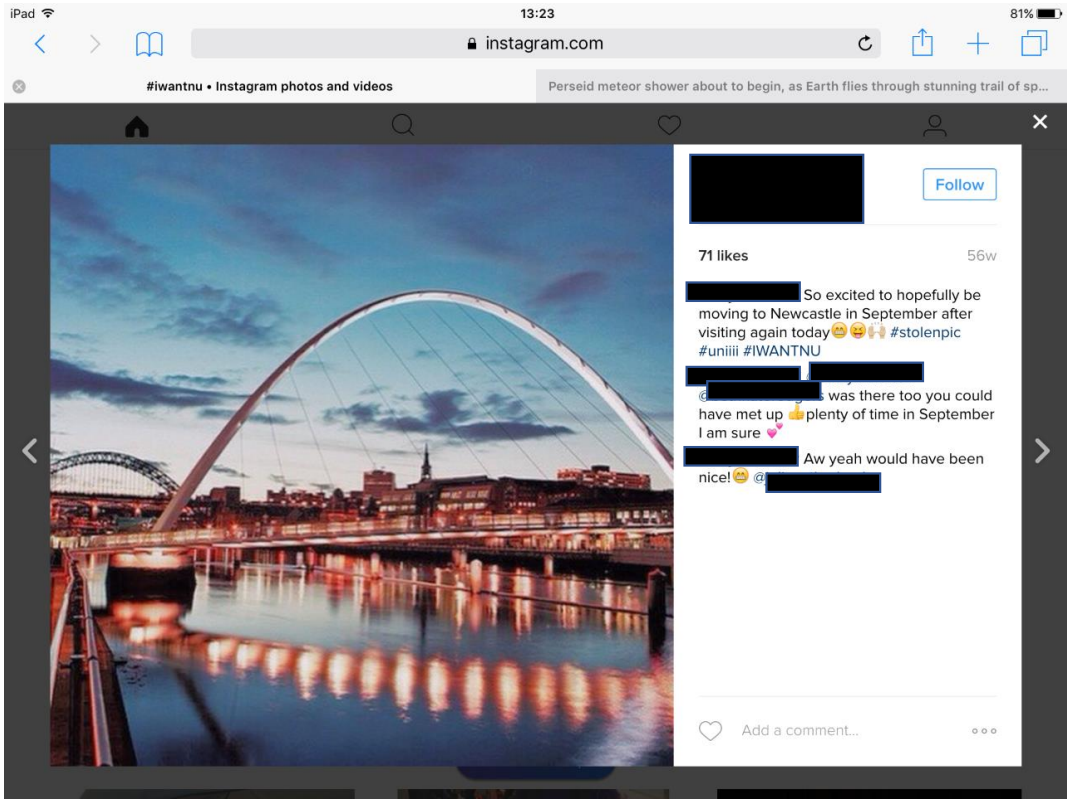
Screenshot 21 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 22 #IWANTNU

Screenshot 23 #IWANTNU

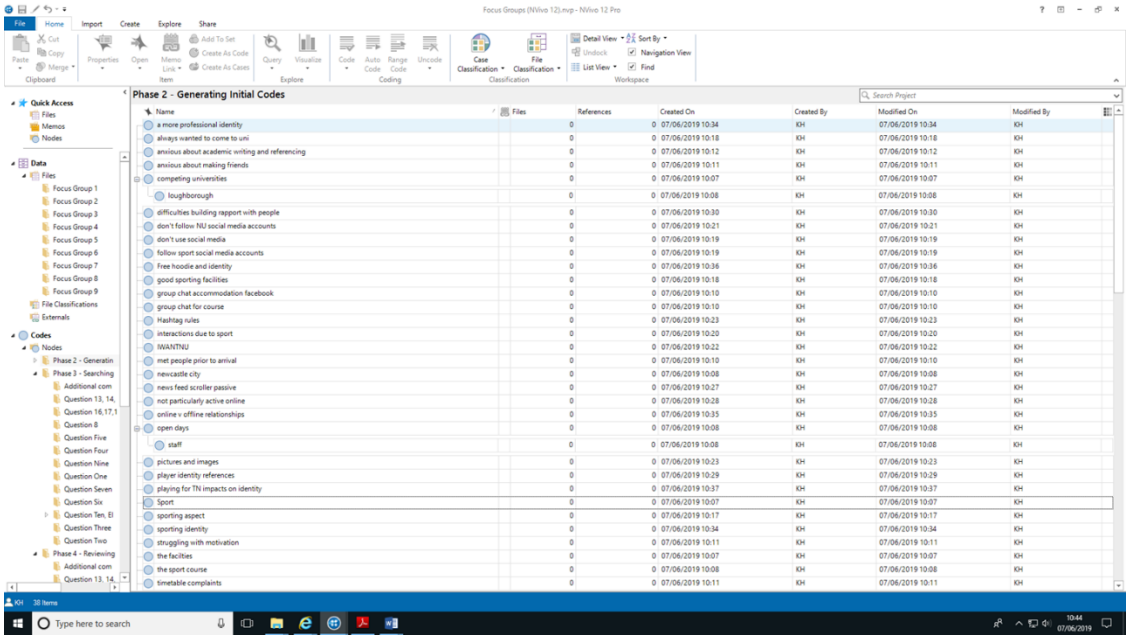


Screenshot 24 #IWANTNU

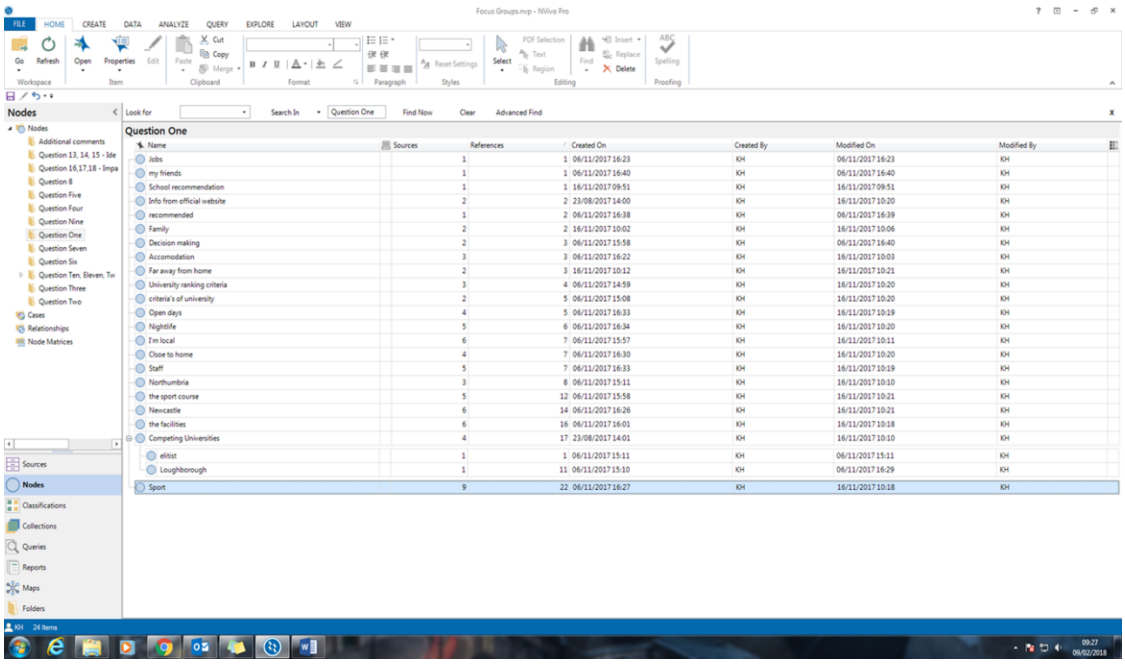


D2. Stage Two analysis initial consumption stage

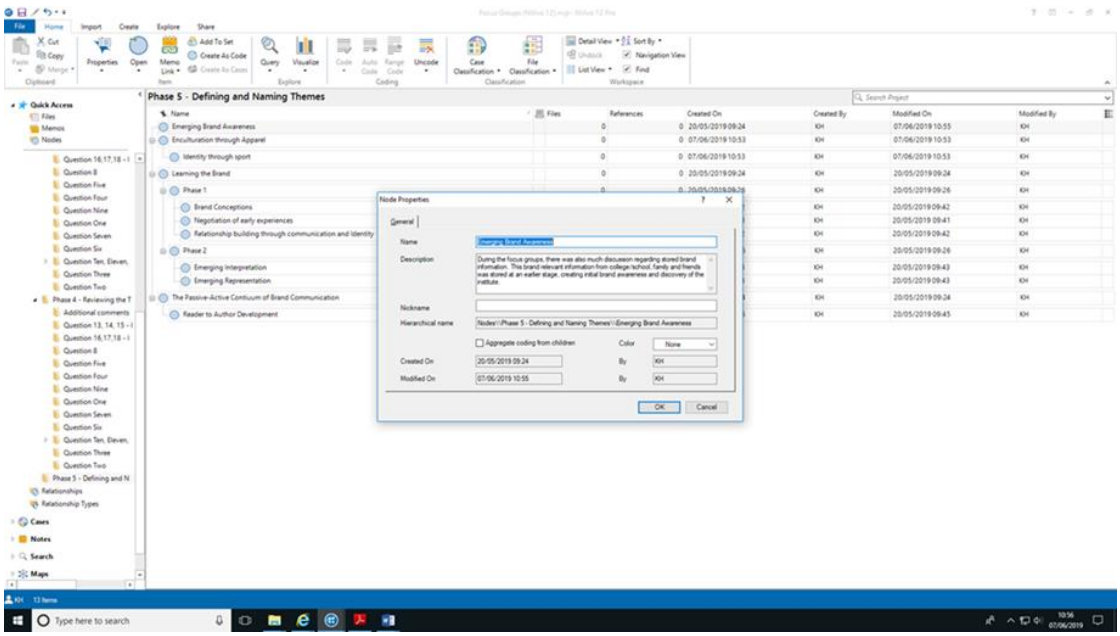
NVivo Figure 1 - Screenshot of the NVivo File at Phase 2 – Generating Initial Codes



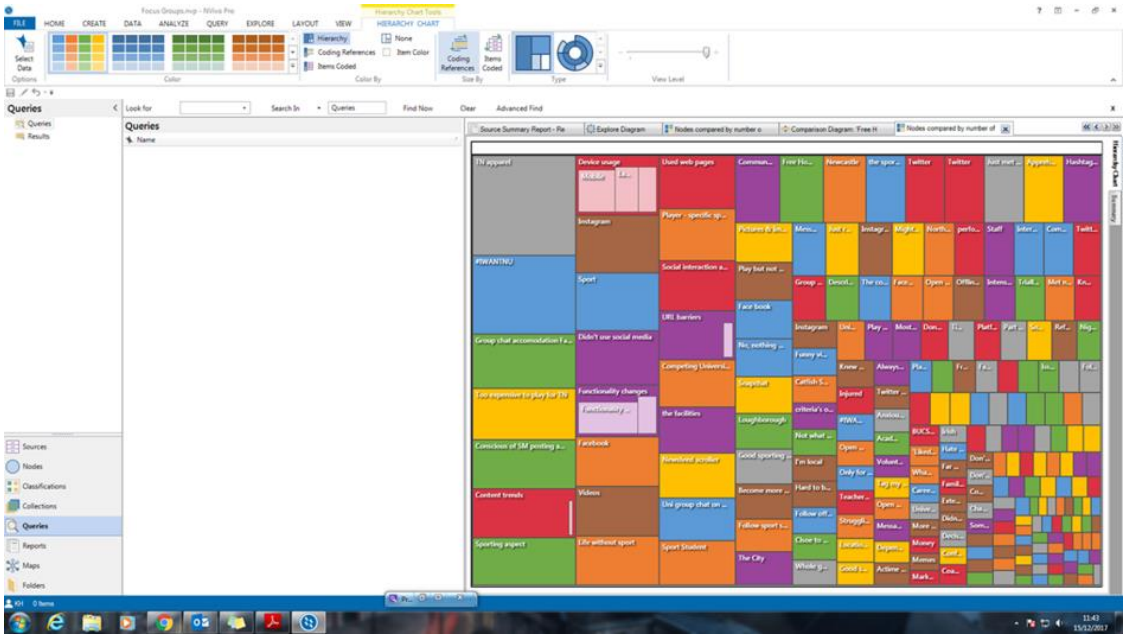
NVivo Figure 2 - Screenshot of NVivo File at Phase 3 – Searching for Themes

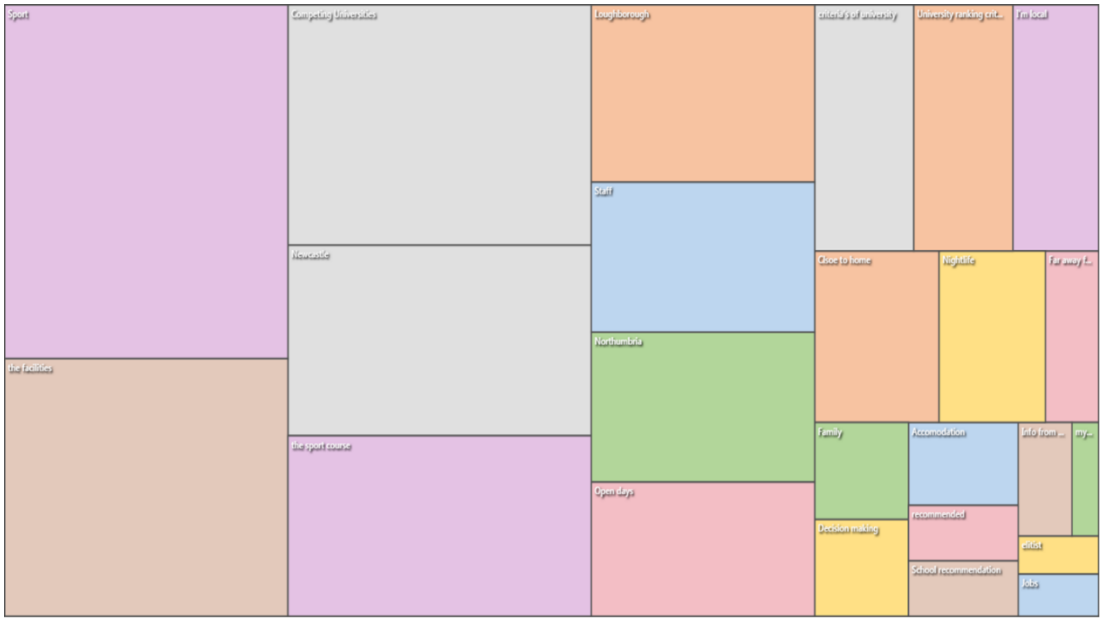


NVivo Figure 3 - Screenshot of NVivo File at Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes using NVivo memo function



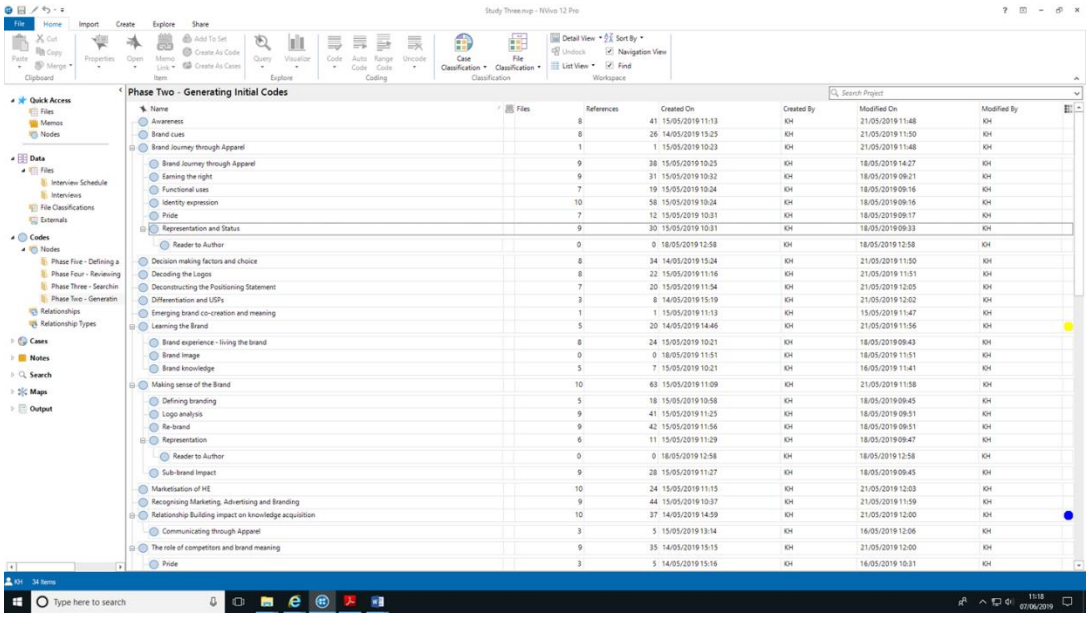
Visual Hierarchy Charts



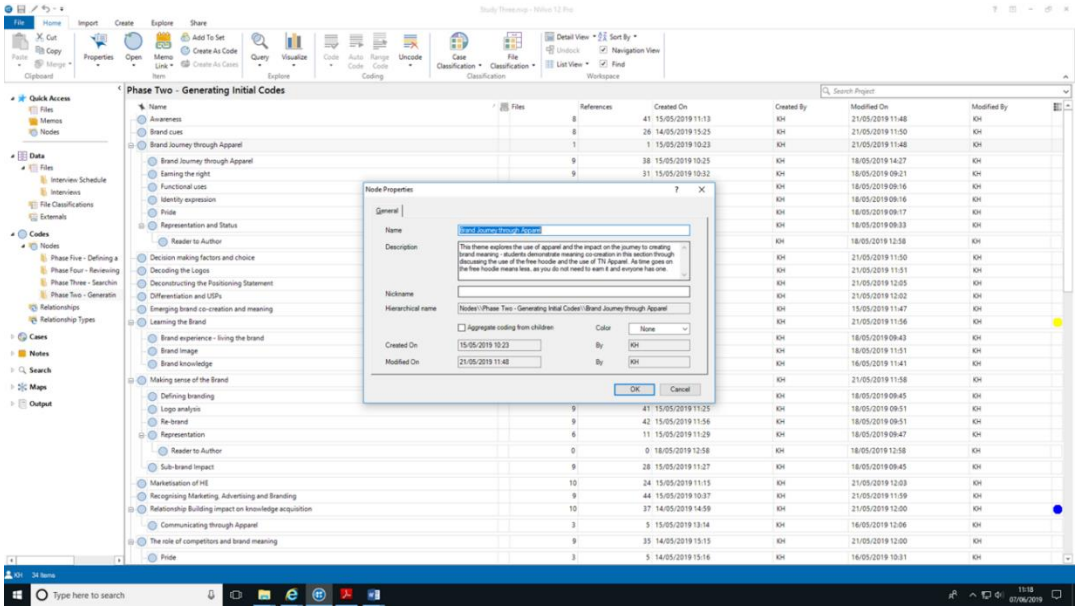

Sport
Competing Universities
Loughborough
criteria's of university
University ranking and...
I'm local
Staff
Newcastle
close to home
Nightlife
Far away f...
the facilities
Northumbria
Family
Accomodation
Info from ...
my...
the sport course
Open days
recommended
Decision making
advist
School recommendation
Jobs

D3. Stage Three analysis established consumption stage

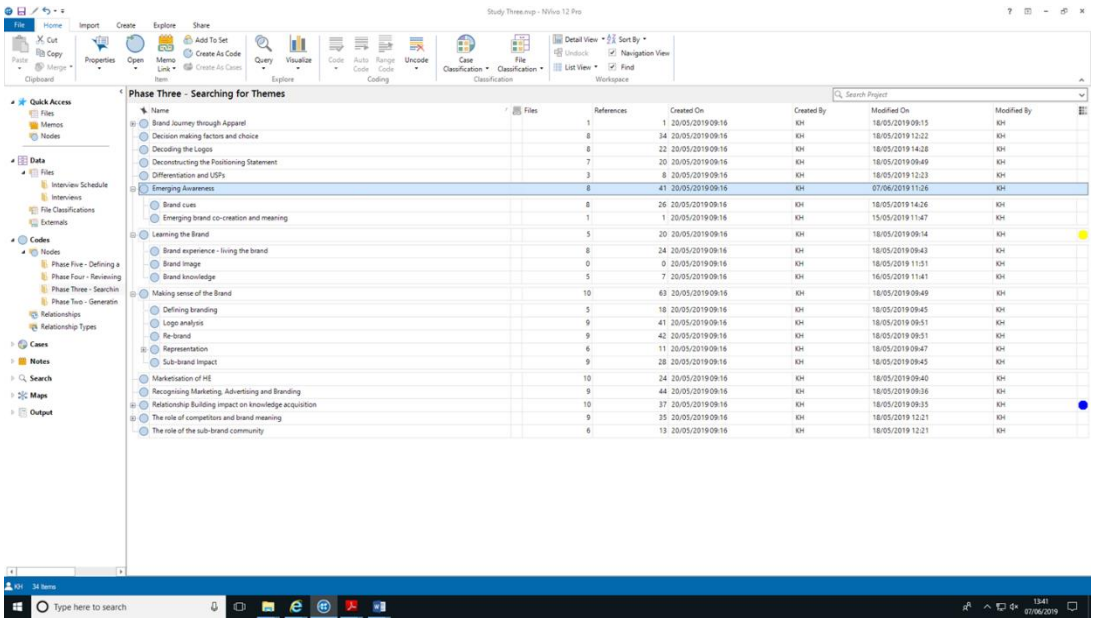
NVivo Figure 4 - Screenshot of the NVivo File at Phase 2 – Generating Initial Codes



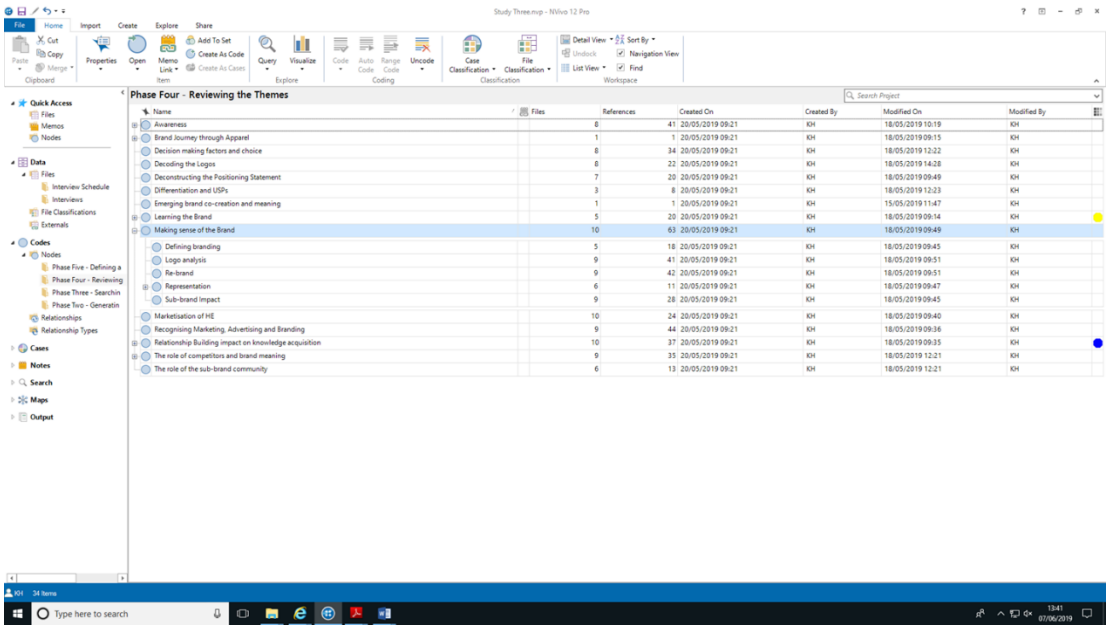
NVivo Figure 5 - Screenshot of the NVivo File at Phase 2 – Generating Initial Codes using NVivo memos and thick description



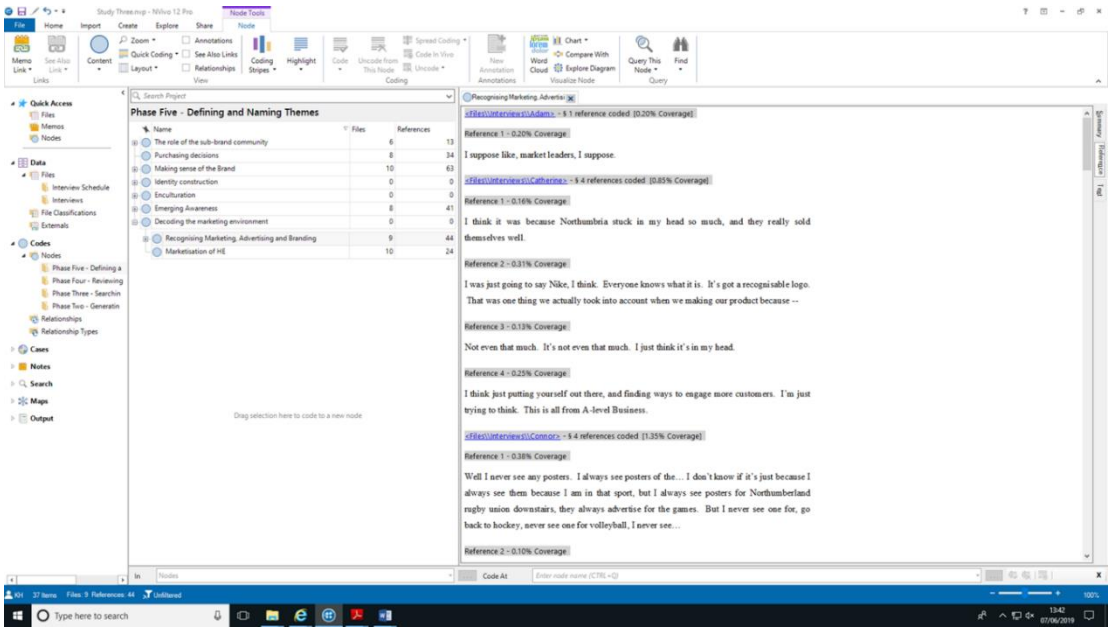
NVivo Figure 6 - Screenshot of the NVivo File at Phase 3 – Searching for Themes



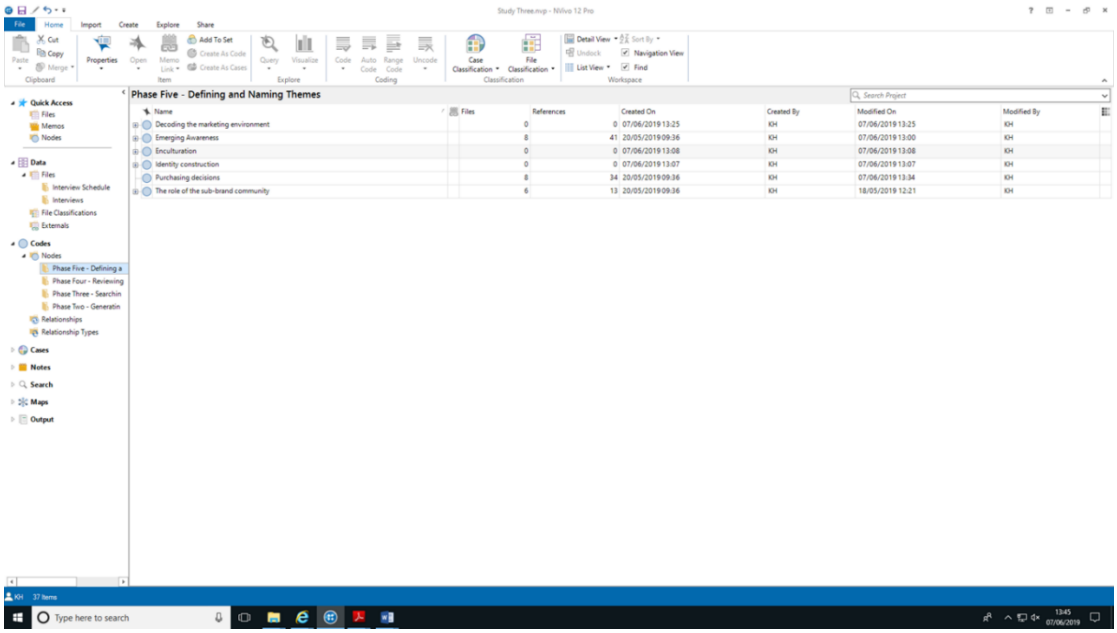
NVivo Figure 7 - Screenshot of the NVivo File at Phase 4 - Reviewing the Themes



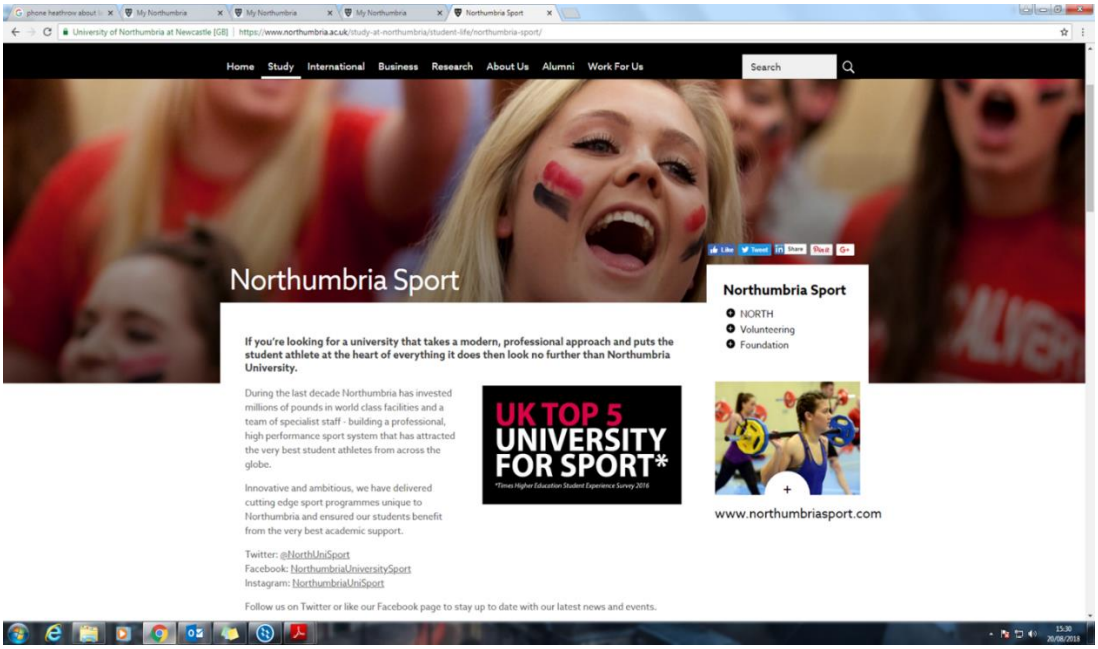
NVivo Figure 8 - Screenshot of the NVivo File at Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes



NVivo Figure 9 - Screenshot of the NVivo File at Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes



APPENDIX E – Screenshot of sport as a visible part of the university's promotional strategy



APPENDIX F – LIST OF PUBLICATIONS AND CONFERENCE PAPERS GENERATED FROM THESIS.

Published

1. **Hardcastle, K**., Cook, P., Sutherland**,** M., (2019) Improving student transition and retention; a netnographic insight into information exchange and conversation topics for pre-arrival sport management students – **Accepted** with the *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice.*

Under Review

2. **Hardcastle, K.,** Edirisingha, P., Cook, P., Sutherland, M., (2019) Lost in translation: networked interplay's in social media communication and message distortion.

Conference Papers and Presentations

1. **Hardcastle, K,** Cook, P., Sutherland, M., (2018) 'How much does the university sport brand impact students journey and identity construction in English higher education?' *Abstract accepted for the 26th European Association of Sport Management Conference.* Malmo, Sweden. 5th-8th of September 2018. Awarded scholarship for contribution and attendance.

2. **Hardcastle, K**., Cook, P., Sutherland**,** M., (2016) 'The co-production of interpretive communities within the English higher education context, as defined by sport consumers'. *24th European Association of Sport Management Conference.* Warsaw, Poland.

3. **Hardcastle, K**., Sutherland**,** M., (2016) 'Engaging the consumer: A Netnography of the student journey within the English HE sector'. *49th Academy of Marketing Conference.* Northumbria University, Newcastle.

4. **Hardcastle, K**., Cook, P., Sutherland, M., (2016). 'A Netnographic Approach to the Co-Production of Interpretive Communities within the English Higher Education Context as Defined by Sport Consumers'. *49th Academy of Marketing Conference.* Northumbria University, Newcastle.

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CO-CREATING BRAND MEANING IN THE POSTMODERN ERA: UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER AWARENESS OF BRANDING IN THE ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

K A HARDCASTLE

PhD

2020